Robert Reed: How It Feels

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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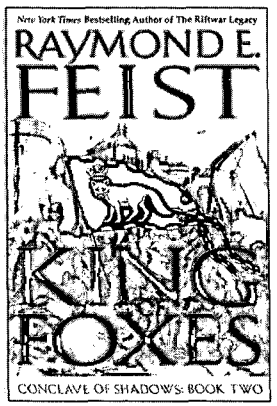

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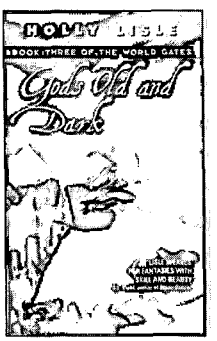

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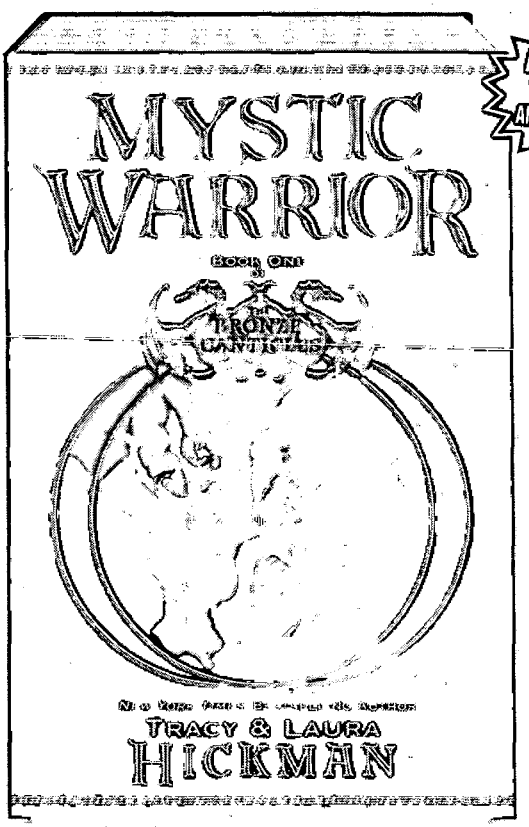

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May • 55th Year of Publication

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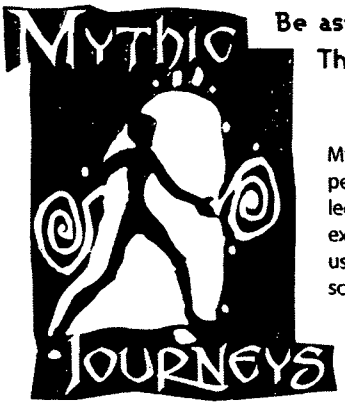

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

I'M USUALLY the last person to join a crusade—I'm not what you'd call a campaigner — but I'd like to enlist your aid in a good cause:

Let's get Isaac Asimov on a U.S. postage stamp.

I'm not the first person to come up with this good notion — there have already been some fan efforts, including a Website (at *http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Vault/4986/asimovstamp/*)—but I don't think I've seen anyone make a call to arms in print before for this cause. And I doubt there's anyone reading this magazine who believes Dr. A *isn't* worthy of such an honor, but in case I'm wrong, consider:

•Since the Good Doctor parted ways with us more than ten years ago, he's now eligible for inclusion in the U.S. commemorative stamp program.

• Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics pioneered thinking in the field of robotics.

• His novels and stories remain immensely popular with readers of all ages, with *I, Robot* currently in production for a feature film adaptation.

• His nonfiction writing was unmatched for its clarity and ability to convey difficult concepts with ease. I think there was no better popularizer of science through the second half of the twentieth century.

• Two generations of scientists and engineers were influenced and inspired by him.

• Just as Albert Einstein became a familiar icon as a physicist, so too did Dr. A represent the genre of science fiction to the world at large — more so than any other individual, I'd say.

That last point begs the question about the other great sf writers — Heinlein, Sturgeon, Simak, John W. Campbell, Bester? Wouldn't it

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be lovely to see their pretty faces on stamps? Sure, but I think that in practical terms, it would be hard to convince the U.S.P.S. to issue many stamps for science fiction writers. Let's focus our efforts on getting one approved.

There's an ongoing series of stamps called the Literary Arts series that has included most recently Ayn Rand, Ogden Nash, and Zora Neale Hurston. I think Dr. Asimov would fit in well with this series. If you agree, drop a note to:

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We've posted a short letter on our Website *(www.fsfmag.com)* that you can print out, sign, and send to them. If you'd rather express yourself, be polite and keep to the point.

I'm passing around this editorial to the editors of the other sf magazines in hopes that they'll enlist their readers too. Perhaps one of them is better at verse than I am and can come up with an appropriate limerick in Dr. Asimov's honor about licking the back of a stamp with his likeness on it (Dr. Asimov was very fond of bawdy limericks, in case you're wondering why I'd say such a thing). Me, I'll end this editorial just by saying that when the day comes when we can send a letter via Asimov, the first one I'll mail will be addressed to "The Future."

—GVG

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Alien possession—so really, what's the deal with it anyway? Leave it to Robert Reed to set us straight on this count.

How It Feels

By Robert Reed

PAULINE

MY ONE DAY WAS PRETTY much great. Alien possession is kind of fun, really! The Glick-Pick had been orbiting us for a full week, and the stories were seeping out about secret deals being made with the government. "Cultural diffusion agreements," sources called them. We would get fancy new technologies, and the aliens got to rent human bodies. That's how the Glick-Pick learned about new species, I guess. Of course when I heard that news, I was pretty much like everybody. Scared shitless. I kept imagining these wormy things pushing in through my rectum, slithering up my spine, then building little houses inside my brain. But actually that's not how the Glick-Pick work. Really, there's nothing gross about it. What they do, they slip through your scalp while you're sleeping. Eight or nine of them at a time, usually. I don't know why. But you sleep right through the business, and if there's anything weird about your dreams that night...well, it's not their fault. They've practiced this stuff

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for a million years. They're professionals. Really, the aliens know how to treat a person. Better than a lot of the men I've known, I could say.

Anyway, after that first week, I'd convinced myself that there wasn't much to worry about. The odds of being possessed weren't even one in a thousand, I kept hearing. Which made it pretty unlikely that I'd ever be picked, or that I'd ever see anybody who was.

But the thing is: The Glick-Pick had a thing for women.

More often than not, young women.

And who'd guess that their favorite young women were single ladies with a passion for body art and beer and boys and parties and more beer, and sometimes waking up in a strange guy's bed?

Don't get me started. There's reasons, and they're not your particular business. What matters is that they found me where I was, and I never felt them get inside me. I was having some bad dreams — not too uncommon after my kind of night — and then all of the sudden, I was awake. Only I wasn't. You know? My eyes were open, and I was seeing out of them. Down my ears came this half-choked snore from my date. I could feel the sheets on top of me and something wet down under my foot, and that's all I'm going to say about that. But honestly, it wasn't me who climbed out of bed. It wasn't me who forced me to get up way before dawn. That just never happens in my life. On tiptoes, they made me walk around, dressing myself with last night's clothes — my slacks and shoes, and for some reason, his shirt. Then they felt my pain, and because they're really good hosts, they let me take a long pee before we slipped out the door.

For the first couple, three hours, we just walked and gawked. And I mean We. There were nine of them. Each had a name, and I learned their names, except they weren't names like people have. I guess when you don't normally have a body — when you're just a bunch of impulses and opinions streaking through a neural network — you don't need sayable names. But there were definitely nine of them, each with its own voiceless voice, and it was the ten of us that walked hard until midmorning, watching the people around us and always talking among ourselves.

I felt good. Really. The last few days had been pretty wicked, but they took care of me. It was like a little holiday. When I got hungry, they led me into this great breakfast place on Market, crowded and loud, and I ate my fill of waffles and ostrich bacon, and then they put me back on my feet

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and out the door. But I hadn't paid, I told them. I tried to go back, but they didn't let me. One after another, they explained that the bill would be taken care off, that if the restaurant put in a voucher to the government, the restaurant would be happy. Besides, everybody in there could tell I was possessed. That or they just weren't paying attention.

And that's another neat, unexpected part of being possessed. People knew. Looking into my face, total strangers could see that something was wrong. Was eerie, and different from other people, and intriguing enough to make them stop and stare.

When I finally dropped by my apartment, sometime in early afternoon, my roommates asked flat-out, "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing is wrong," my mouth said. But not me.

"Bullshit," they said. "What the hell pills have you been eating, Pauline?"

"But you aren't talking to Pauline," they heard.

Then the two of them laughed like crazy. "Oh, God," they said. "Oh, shit! Look who the Glick-Pick plucked!"

I took a long shower. My hosts had this mothering-thing for smelling good, which is why I blew our water-ration for the entire day. Then they dressed me in my slickest black gown and an old pair of hiking boots, and while they were doing my hair, my roommates drifted in, and with this nervous little voice, Serena asked if they could go out with us. Their treat. "That would be lovely," one of the Glick-Pick said. So we went out together, the twelve of us. It was like a walking news conference. One of my roommates would ask some big question, and the aliens would do their best to answer it. Then the other roommate would ask something else, or maybe just reword the same question, and another alien would answer, again using my mouth. My voice. "Where's your home world?" "Where else have you gone?" "How long have you been traveling?" "Really, that long?" "Did you ever have real bodies?" "And what did those bodies look like? Do you remember?"

These were all old questions, and the Glick-Pick got pretty bored. So they started asking their own questions. About Serena. About Glory. About their childhoods and schools and boyfriends, and what they did to help the economy and nation-state, and what they wanted for their future.

People just love talking about themselves.

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Finally, Serena interrupted their questions. It was evening. We were eating dinner. And out of the blue, she asked, "Do all of you feel what Pauline feels?"

Before we could answer, Glory asked, "Can you make her do anything? Anything you want?"

That was a big question, and the Glick-Pick answered together. "She is ours," they promised, their voices purring along together. "If we agree on a specific act, she will do it."

By the way, I didn't mention this: My roommates are real shits.

The little bitch Serena smiled at us and said, "All right. So make Pauline strip naked."

"We will not," the aliens answered.

"Right here, right now," said Glory. She's a big plain girl with a big smart mouth. "Strip, or we won't believe you. We'll think Pauline's faking, and you know what happens then?"

The Glick-Pick remained silent, probably trying to guess the future.

"Pauline's name isn't on the lease," said Glory. "If we think she's a phony, we'll shove her out on the street."

It wasn't much of a threat. I mean, what were the odds that those two bitches would go through with their threat? And there's another thing: The aliens had gotten to know me, and they must have sensed that I wouldn't mind all that much. Stripping, I mean. So what if it was a four-star restaurant and our fire-and-ice-cream dessert had just stopped burning? That's why they got me up on top of our table. They made sure everybody in the place was staring, and waiting, and I took hold of my gown's straps, and then it was as if I was losing my balance. They handled my body that smoothly. I half-fell, half-knelt, and one of the aliens said, "Glory, give me your hand, please," and when she reached up, on instinct, the Glick-Pick used the steak knife from my plate, cutting her dress down the back.

I wish I could have laughed then. But I can laugh now, just thinking about those big flabby tits flying. In all the confusion and applause, I left. We left, minus my shitty roommates, and of course without paying any part of that monstrous bill.

They took me walking again.

When my legs started hurting, I stopped and sat on a little flight of

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stairs. After a while, this older guy came past. He looked at my face, at my gown and my boots, and after he passed, he turned and came back again. On his third pass, he asked, "Are you?"

"Are we what?" said my mouth.

"Jesus," he said, smiling in this big shy way.

He was good-enough looking for being in his forties. He said his name was Jim, and he was a huge admirer. "How many are you?" he asked.

"Nine," said my mouth. "And Pauline."

"Hello, Pauline," he said, his voice soft and impressed. "Hello, everyone."

Everybody said, "Good evening."

Then with a shaky hand, he pointed. "I live up the block. I would be honored...honored...if you were my guest. For a little while, maybe?"

A voice said, "Yes."

We walked a couple, three blocks and then up into a nice enough apartment. Jim had a huge stock of liquor, and after a group consultation, the Glick-Pick decided on an imported beer. Watching from a distance, I was sure Jim just wanted to poke my body, having his fun with these aliens. But instead he sat down on the opposite chair, and with a big grin asked, "Will you teach us how to build starships?"

"Negotiations are underway," my mouth said. "The final terms have not been reached."

"Sure. I can understand that." He gulped and sat back and then sat forward again, sweaty elbows on his trembling legs. "But I've heard...read...that we've purchased one of your tricks. Something that helps to enhance the intelligence in anything alive."

"Perhaps," said the Glick-Pick.

"It's a really neat machine," he claimed. "Am I right about this? The human mind — any mind — is capable of huge feats of memory and intelligence. It just takes time to learn and to solve complex problems. But by supercooling our neurons in some special way...we'll be able to accomplish twenty years of learning and thinking in just one afternoon....

"Is that the truth?"

A voice said, "Perhaps."

Another voice said, "Perhaps not."

"Sure. I understand. You can't talk about it yet." Jim nodded and

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stared at his own feet. Then he said, "When you leave us...are you going to take any of us with you?"

The reply was a sip of beer, and otherwise, silence.

"Because I'd leave my body behind," Jim told us. "If that's what it took to travel between the stars." Then he sighed and straightened, saying, "I've always had this feeling. It's my destiny. Going to other worlds, I mean."

The Glick-Pick made my body stand up.

"It's rather late," one of them announced. "Would you please find us a cab?"

"Oh, sure."

"And thank you for the fine beer," another voice added.

"You liked it? Really?"

"Rather well, yes."

The aliens didn't usually take people for more than sixteen hours, and my time was running out. Talking just to me, they asked where I wanted to be when I regained control. Meanwhile, Old Jim had waved down a cab and was explaining things, handing the driver — this half-terrified Indian man — a couple gold bills. Then he said, "Good-bye, my friends," with this weepy little voice. "Until later, perhaps."

The driver heard an address, and he took us roaring down the street, watching us in the mirror as much as he watched the traffic. We pulled up in front of a different apartment building. The aliens got me to the front door and rang the buzzer. My old boyfriend was home. His name was Samson, believe it or not. Dumb as shit, and strong as shit, and a pretty fair lay, if you happened to catch him sober. Samson's stupid voice came across the speaker, asking, "Why would I want to see you, bitch?"

"Our apologies," the aliens said together. "Pauline informed us that she wishes to be with you tonight."

"We?" Samson blubbered.

The guy's never been confused for being smart.

"Pauline?" he cried out. "Are you really possessed?"

One of the Glick-Pick said, "For another few minutes, yes."

The door buzzed.

The ten of us climbed way too many stairs.

Samson's door was hanging open. He stood in the middle of his little

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place, watching my face. Measuring me. Then again, he asked, "Are you really possessed?"

"Possession is an inadequate word," they replied. "We have entered into a temporary symbiotic joining — "

"God, shit. You are!"

I'm not telling you what happened between Samson and me. You don't want to know. Okay? Let's just agree that it was awful, and he's a selfish abusive prick, and guys like him should be tied up and floated out to sea, with all the world's trash stacked on them.

"We wish to jump into you next," a voice said.

He gulped. "What's that?"

"We will establish a temporary symbiotic joining with you," another voice promised. "If you would, please. Lie down now, please."

"What? On the sofa?"

"Or the floor," the voice said. "The floor might be better."

Samson couldn't help himself. He dropped hard enough that the floor shook, and then he had to ask, "Like this?"

"No," someone said. "On your belly, with your hands behind your back."

"This way?"

"Pretty much."

And then my eyes found his old softball bat waiting in the coat closet, and with my hands, somebody got a good tight grip on the handle, and somebody moved me into the middle of the room. I won't tell you who. I never will. But whatever's the truth, everybody got what they deserved, and isn't that what really matters?

SERENA

Why Pauline? That's what I don't get. I mean, if anybody wants to experience the Glick-Pick more than me, I don't know who that is. But Pauline's just this spoiled party-girl with a fondness for ugly glow-in-the-dark tattoos and these little brass chimes punched through her nipples, and other places too. She doesn't know anything about aliens. If something's past the reach of her skin, she doesn't care. I mean, it just seems like such a silly waste. All those light-years crossed, and who do they jump inside?

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This body full of STD nightmares and who knows what kinds of self-absorbed thoughts, too.

Last week, when the astronomers first saw the starship, I knew it was important. Nobody else in our apartment understood. Glory, always the skeptic, said it was nothing. Just some lost space junk, or something. And Pauline didn't give it even that much thought. She sat down to watch the news with us, but only because she didn't have anywhere else to be. She'd just broken up with Samson. Again. I know she didn't care about some little smear of light moving out near the Moon. I had to explain it to both of them. "It's not just something that we've seen," I said. "There was a signal, too. A couple weeks ago, from farther out in the solar system. I read about it...last week, I think. Anyway, the signal was powerful, and it was aimed straight at us."

"What signal?" Glory asked. "I hadn't heard about any signal."

"This one." I got my plasma running a search, and the long screen offered up a hundred thousand sites talking about nothing else. I pulled up a likely one, showing them the same graph that I remembered from last week. At a certain narrow frequency, for about two minutes, something had screamed at the Earth.

"So what did it say to us?" Glory asked.

"How would I know?" I growled. "But they're working on it right now. You can believe that, for sure."

Those next days were crazy-busy, for me and everybody else. New pictures of the starship were released every few minutes, taken by amateur astronomers around the world. A hundred news networks were interrogating experts and people on street corners. Of course the government was fighting to keep everything secret, and there were all these fake little stories about lost Chinese boosters and whatnot. But you can't keep the truth quiet. Not with the big stuff, at least. On the second day, when the secret meetings started up in Washington, we heard. Or when those hackers stole an image from one of the Pentagon spy-eyes — the famous picture showing a neat little teardrop not much bigger than a little car, all black and slick and orbiting just three hundred thousand miles above our heads. And then it was late on the third day, and we learned that the aliens were slipping inside human beings, and their name was the Glick-Pick, and they said they were happy to meet us and very advanced but

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completely friendly, and they were here to learn and to teach, and our world would soon be a much nicer place.

I was thrilled. How could anyone not be thrilled? Glory finally realized it was all true, and even Pauline took a sort-of interest in what was happening. She actually helped us scan the web, waiting for any breaking news. Of course she'd occasionally remind us, "Samson is such a fuck," and little lessons like that. But generally, she was quiet. She sat in her chair with her old notebook, and Glory and I shared the sofa, working with our notebooks. Anything of interest went up on the plasma, and we just soaked it all in. The history of it. The whole amazing, wonderful story.

On the fourth day, when the press interviewed the Glick-Pick, the three of us along with a few billion of our closest, dearest friends sat watching, and listening, crazy and thrilled with it all.

The aliens had claimed that woman from Los Angeles, that blond with those beauty-contest looks. As soon as the Glick-Pick took her, they used her mouth to call the local televisions, newspapers and webcasters. Cameras were sent. Then the networks began to pay attention to this odd little press conference. The woman was wearing a simple skirt and a man's blue dress jacket. Smiling at the world, she spoke with a flat slow and obviously smart voice, explaining, "Eight of us are temporarily residing inside this willing host. We will do her no harm, nor will we harm any other person during our brief stay."

"Is it true?" one reporter shouted. "Are you called the Glick-Pick?"

"Glick-Pick is one of many names we employ," they answered. "Its advantage is that you can pronounce it — "

"What do you look like?" another voice blurted.

A voice with a slightly different cadence explained, "In the strictest sense, we have no appearance. We have no true body and nothing that resembles a face. Each of us, in essence, is a set of coherent impulses interwoven with elaborate quantum anchors, and we are capable of traveling through almost any neural network, and for brief journeys, through empty space."

Hearing that explanation was a bit of a shock. Pretty California women don't usually command that kind of vocabulary, which is probably why nobody spoke for a long moment.

The aliens broke the silence. Another one of them, or maybe several

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of them, explained, "We began as you are, as finite souls imprisoned in corporeal bodies. But our technologies have allowed us to escape what is mortal, and our souls are vast and ancient, and hopefully a little wise, too."

"How old are you?" I muttered.

Half a dozen reporters asked the same obvious questions.

"By your count, a little more than a million years old."

"No shit," Pauline said, finally acting impressed.

"How many of you are there?" somebody cried out. "Onboard that little ship of yours...how many...?"

With the flat voice, the mouth said, "A few more than two trillion souls. Approximately."

Another huge silence took hold.

Then a scared voice somewhere back in the crowd asked, "Are you going to conquer us now? Is that the plan?"

"Never," they replied in an instant.

"Why should we believe you?" another doubter asked.

"Yeah!" Glory muttered. "Why should we?"

"What is true, is true," the Glick-Pick pointed out. "But what you believe is your choice to make, and we can only hope to prove to you that you should trust in our endless good will."

Arms lifted high.

The young woman's hand pointed.

"Do you believe in God?" a reporter wanted to know.

A brief pause was followed by the perfect answer. "We believe in many wonderful things."

With a grumble, Glory asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

I said, "Quiet."

Another reporter asked, "Exactly how many human beings are you going to take over?"

"Only a few," the aliens promised. "A chosen few."

"Chosen how?"

The pretty face showed the barest hint of a smile. "There are many criteria. But first of all, we want souls who are open to the possibilities — "

"I'm open," the reporter interrupted. Then he stepped forward — a little old guy with an angry face under his little toupee. "Take me. Come on!"

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With a calm, dismissive voice, the Glick-Pick told him, "No thank you."

Everybody laughed. At the press conference, and around the world.

Then somebody else asked, "But what happens when you give up your hold on her? Is this woman going to recover — ?"

"Perhaps we should demonstrate," was the reply. Then the pretty face blinked a few times, and the smile brightened, and a distinctly different voice laughed, nervously admitting, "You know, I don't like audiences."

Obviously, this was a different person. Her hands shook. Her voice shook. She answered a few questions, assuring everybody that she had always been conscious and she felt wonderful, then and now. When asked why she was taken by the Glick-Pick, she shrugged and admitted, "I don't know. I heard stories about these possessions, and I thought to myself...I thought that wouldn't it be neat, if it happened to me...you know...?"

I knew what she meant. Exactly. Sitting in our little living room, on the tiny sofa with Glory beside me, I shut my eyes and imagined the top of my head opening up like a door. Practically begging for the aliens to join with me.

"They're clever," said Glory. "I'll give them that."

I opened my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean shrewd." Glory laughed, explaining, "She's an appealing spokesperson. If you're planning to announce your presence to the world — "

"Shit," said Pauline.

Our roommate was watching the press conference, but there wasn't anything happy about her. She wasn't seeing what anybody else saw. She was so consumed by her own little life, she had to flip the bird at the screen, and with a furious voice — a screaming voice — she said, "He's got a blond like her. That's who he's screwing now."

Samson. Again.

"You know," Glory began, ready to say something calm. Something rational.

Pauline threw a look at her, shutting her up.

On the plasma, the woman was saying, "I don't really like talking in public." Then she laughed, her perfect teeth shining at us.

"Bastard," said Pauline. "Prick bastard."

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The aliens had arrived, but she plainly didn't give a shit. Her old boyfriend was the only thing that mattered. Which made it all the worse when the Glick-Pick, for no sane reason that I could see, decided to set up housekeeping in her bitter little mind.

SAMSON

I've gotten to the point — don't take this wrong, please — but I've gotten to where I want to ask every woman, "Are you crazy? Are you on medication, or should you be?" I don't want to have anything more to do with unstable girls. I don't care how mean that sounds. It's just not worth it. Not in the long haul, it isn't.

Like Pauline. Our honeymoon lasted a good three months. We had our fun. But when you can see things coming to an end, what's the point in waiting? That's my thinking. Pauline wasn't the same girl anymore. She looked the same, sure. Black hair worn long and this long body kept strong with weights and nerves and God knows what kind of pills, and she still had her famous glow-in-bed tattoos, plus those metal chimes meant to be hooked up to special batteries, pumping current into her special places. All of that was fun enough. But then I started noticing how she never had anything good to say about anybody. Not her roommates, and never my friends. Plus she wasn't wasting much time complimenting me, either. Which is why I broke up with her that first time. Neither of us seemed that happy, and so why not put things on ice?

Well. Ice melts, and time makes you stupid. I know that's one of my problems. I don't remember things as well as some people do. A week passes, and a month, and I find myself remembering what I liked about the people I don't see anymore. And forgetting all the things that bothered me.

That's my excuse for letting Pauline back into my life. At least for that second ride, I blame being forgetful.

And the third time? I don't know. I was lonely. I was horny. This is a big city, but everybody's a stranger, and finding women worth dating can be tough. Personally, I don't like drinking. I don't like bars or the clubs. Which was another thing wrong with Pauline. The girl wasn't happy unless she had a beer somewhere close. Dating her was rough on my liver. So I broke up with her that second time, and after a week or so, I asked this

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woman from work out for dinner. It was nice enough, and she was pleasant enough. But nothing would come of it. I could tell that much even before our dessert came. She started talking about the Lord and His place in her life, and I found myself feeling nothing. Not angry. Not really even sad. Just empty and a little stupid, wondering why I'd ever let myself feel anything like hope.

Later that night, when I got home again, Pauline was sitting on the front steps. She looked like she'd been crying, which was different. Which was kind of neat, really. She'd given up her tough-as-nails attitude, at least for a few minutes. She told me that she was sorry. She was going to get real help with her drinking and the pills, but she needed somebody to lean against now. And I was her only hope. Which was sort of nice to hear. Who wouldn't like to have themselves described that way? So I let her come upstairs, and for the next three days, Pauline was wonderful. Funny and sweet and a joy to be with. But then all of the sudden, smack in the middle of things, she climbed off me and made these angry little fists.

"What's the matter?" she asked me.

Nothing was the matter.

"Why aren't you hard tonight?"

I was. I mean, I'm not a machine, but I was doing all right.

"What? Did you screw her today?"

"Who?" I asked.

"That blond bitch. Did you?"

"What blond?" But finally, I was beginning to figure things out. "What? Did you follow me the other night? You saw my date — ?"

"I don't follow people," she told me. "But yeah, I happened to spot you and the bitch."

But she had been following me. I knew it sure as I knew that for the third time, we were finished.

Never again, I promised.

Then early the next day, I heard the news. Everybody heard it. Something unknown had moved into orbit, just a few days after some big mysterious signal was heard down in Australia somewhere. Governments everywhere were claiming that they knew nothing, they hadn't made contact with any aliens, and there were perfectly reasonable explanations for what people were seeing. But what would you expect from our leaders?

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Of course they wouldn't give out any important secrets. Deals were being made. The world was going to change. It was such enormous news, and so of course, I took a full week of vacation time. Just to watch the news programs, the Web. Hunting for every little thing about the Glick-Pick.

The possession business was the best part.

I didn't think it would happen to me. But I could hope. There were a couple times, in the middle of the night, when I wondered if I was feeling *them* starting to slip inside me. But if they were, they didn't make themselves obvious. Which is something plenty of people thought of before me. That the aliens might be inside all of us. And not just eight or nine of them. But thousands. I mean, if there's a couple trillion of them inside that little teardrop ship of theirs...and if they wanted...I think plenty of them could ride around inside our big, stupid heads....

You know why more women get taken than men?

As a rule, women aren't as dangerous as men.

I think that's the big reason.

This is going to be so great, I think. All the new technologies are going to make us better. Happier. All of that.

I want to be smart.

If I can, I want to be so smart that nobody can fool me again. I want to know what to do in every complicated situation. And sure, I want to travel to other worlds and live for a million years, and maybe find some nice alien girl who isn't as bizarre as human women can be.

That's what I was thinking when Pauline showed up. Except it wasn't really Pauline. I could tell that when I looked at the security monitor. I could hear it in the sound of her voice. She looked and acted, and talked, exactly like every other one of the Glick-Pick that I'd seen interviewed in the last few days.

Of course I let her up.

Them up, I mean.

When would I get a chance like this again? And when they asked to jump inside me...well, I didn't have to think twice about that! I got down on my floor. I put my hands behind my back. And then, too late, I saw her holding the aluminum bat, and I realized that the aliens had left her. Maybe while she was walking up the stairs, they let her go.

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I'm fuzzy about what happened next and then for the next couple weeks. But when I finally woke up, feeling woozy and pretty much confused, I asked my nurse, "Am I smart now?"

She smiled and said, "I'm sorry. What'd you just say?"

"Was the operation a success?" I asked. I knew time had passed, and I'd been hurt. Badly hurt. But I was feeling better now, which was why I asked, "Did you put alien implants in my head? Huh? Am I going to be a genius now?"

With a sad look on her face, my nurse said to me, "Honey. Trust me. Nobody on this little planet is anything like a genius."

GLORY

I know how this sounds. Don't believe me, if that's what you want. But from the beginning, I had a feeling. An intuition. This nagging little voice whispering warnings between my ears.

With straight pins and a waiter's shoelace, Serena fixed my dress to where I could walk out in public without being arrested. And after we paid the bill, we ran home. Fast. I wanted a shower. But of course the damned aliens had used up our water rations scrubbing down Pauline, which meant that I was pitted out as well as pissed. So what I did, I went into the kitchen to find comfort food, and Serena started for the living room. Right then, I heard the plasma screen light itself up. Its standing orders were to come on whenever there was big news. But what wasn't big news these days? While I was banging in the cupboards, I heard a new voice, a man's voice talking slowly and carefully — a boring voice, I thought — but as if she was catching fire, Serena called out, "Get in here! Right now, right now!"

Two days before, on the sly, NASA had pulled one of its cookie-cutter probes out of storage, programmed it in the afternoon, and launched it in place of the scheduled game-channel satellite. Somehow, they'd kept the mission secret. At least we couldn't remember any rumors. What their suit-wearing spokesman was describing was the probe's trajectory, except when he was thanking this department or that bureau for their tireless and considerable help, and when the chart behind showed how the probe met up with the alien starship, he repeated what every other expert had been

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saying for the last week. "This is a small object. Smaller than the average living room, for example. Because of its size, its low albedo and the distances involved, earthborn images have proven inconclusive. As we reported to you yesterday, the infamous 'teardrop image' is nothing but a digital fabrication. An elaborate, tasteless joke. And again, I would like to remind everyone in this room, and everyone watching...." He paused for a moment, shaking when he considered the enormous audience watching only him. "I remind you that much of what has been reported and repeated over these last few days is false. Plainly and simply false. Through misunderstandings and wishful thinking, every lie and good-hearted rumor has circled the globe, been embraced as the honest truth, and been impressed on the public's conscious."

He was a tall, ordinary looking man. A scientist and a project administrator, and now the voice of authority. He paused once again, for the briefest moment. Then he reported, "Sixteen minutes ago, we received these images of the unidentified subject. The flyby itself lasted nearly forty seconds. In total, there are nearly five hundred images. All have been posted. These are the best." He vanished, replaced by a black screen dotted with little stars and something larger. We saw an oblong smear on which stood some kind of girder or strut. I felt my heart kick, watching the images change. One by one, we were pulling in close, and then with a firm, fatherly voice, the invisible speaker told us, "We know the object's origins. We are quite certain. The main body is a small asteroid or piece of comet. What fooled us — temporarily, I should add — was the rest of the object. Both radar and spectrographic analysis were modified by what is clearly an artificial object. A manufactured object. An object whose origins were mysterious until moments ago."

Serena leaned forward on the sofa. But I had a feeling, which was why I began to lean back.

"Four years ago," the speaker continued, "the Japanese launched a robotic probe that was designed to study near-Earth asteroids. Contact with the probe was lost early in the mission. The probe was assumed destroyed. But as you can see, the rumors of this machine's death were greatly exaggerated."

On the screen was a black chunk of tar and rock, and like a starving mosquito, the robot clung to its prize.

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Instantly, hundreds of reporters were shouting questions.

The spokesman responded to the loudest of them. With a disappointed voice, he said, "Yes, the purported alien signal. Well, as was mentioned many times during these last days, that signal has some intriguing features. But it originated in an entirely different portion of the sky than that occupied by the supposed starship. And it was a very brief signal. And it was observed by only a single radio telescope. Why the starship and signal need to be related phenomena...well, that's a proposition without evidence. And if I were to vote, I would tell you that our initial analysis holds: The signal originated either from a small, undiagnosed equipment failure, or much more likely, a subtle glitch in the software package used by the telescope to interpret signals."

"What?" Serena gasped. "I didn't understand any of that."

I didn't quite understand. But the heart of his speech was easy to see. "He's telling you there's no such thing as the Glick-Pick."

She straightened her back and said, "Bullshit. What about alien possessions?"

She didn't mention Pauline, I noticed.

Someone in the reporters' pool made the same point. Weren't the Glick-Pick walking our streets right now? The government man nodded, and then offered his ready answer. "I'm not a psychiatrist," he allowed. "But I've been in close contact with every appropriate medical expert. I don't believe that mass hysteria is the only answer at our disposal, but it is a viable explanation. Another, I'm afraid, is simple ugly duplicity. Go back to the beginning: Rumors were spreading through the press, the Internet, and almost every private conversation. The aliens were taking over human bodies, it was claimed. And then suddenly, conveniently, an out-of-work actress holds a press conference, skillfully merging the rumors into a semi-coherent whole. Through design or by simple wishful thinking, she gives these mythical aliens a voice, and a noble purpose, and a performance that we can believe in — "

Serena muted the screen.

I just sat there, listening to her scream about how this couldn't be true. This was just an elaborate government smokescreen, and how could so many people get fooled by lies, and she wasn't any simple fool. "They're just trying to keep everything secret," she assured me. And herself.

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Looking at me, panting from her runaway emotions, she finally asked, "What do you think, Glory?"

I said, "Pauline."

Serena blinked and said nothing.

"Really," I said, "what do you think was happening with her?"

For a long moment, Serena held her tongue. What she wanted was wrestling with what she wanted to believe, and what finally came out of her mouth was pretty much inevitable.

"No," she allowed, "Pauline was faking it. I can see that. But all these others...at least some of these other people...they've got to be genuine...."

I didn't make a sound.

"What are you thinking, Glory?"

That I always understood this was going to be nothing. That it seemed too easy, and way too goofy, and I was embarrassed for every little believing sound that I'd made over the last few days.

"Glory? What do you really think?"

"I think our dear Pauline had all of this planned out."

"She pretended to be possessed? What, as a joke? To get noticed? Is that why she did it?"

"And she got a free dinner, too," I muttered. Then the voice between my ears was talking again, and I shivered, saying, "Let's just hope. You and me. Let's hope that's all she wants from this game."

JIM

She was the most wonderful thing ever to come into my life, and I couldn't let her get away. So after she left in one cab, I waved down another. I told the driver, "That's my wife. She's got my medicine in her purse. Can you just kind of follow her wherever she's going?"

"Where is the lady going?" my driver asked, his Caribbean voice singing each word.

"I don't really know," I admitted.

"Ah, that kind of wife," he said, nodding knowingly. "I understand."

A red light stopped us. But I could see her cab pull up along the next block, and then her cab was empty again, looking for a new rider. I had mine stop, and after giving the driver a fat tip, I started hunting. Which

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building did she vanish inside? I didn't know. Walking back and forth, I felt excited and very happy, and then as time passed, I realized that I wasn't happy at all. I was miserable, lonely and sad, and I couldn't remember being any other way.

By then, I had the girl's destination narrowed down to two buildings. Nobody else was out. It was a little peculiar for a Saturday night, but I didn't ascribe any great meaning to my solitude. I went out into the middle of the street, gazing up at the lit windows. Sometimes a figure moved behind blinds, but nobody looked right. And then someone emerged from another building — not one of my choices — and I realized it was her. It was her, and just by watching, I knew she was the only entity walking down the stairs to the sidewalk.

"Hello," I called out.

She hesitated, just for a moment. In the glow of streetlamps, she seemed quite exotic and mysterious. I liked her long black hair. I liked the she-lion glowing on her bare right shoulder. When she didn't smile, I thought maybe she didn't remember me from before. But aren't the possessed supposed to remember everything they see and say? And then just like that, she gave me this little smile, and breathed deeply a couple times, and with a shake of the head told me, "They're gone. They're out of me."

"I know. I can tell."

Which seemed to please her. She smiled again and pulled her arms around her waist, as if chilled, and said, "Hey, Jim. I wouldn't mind another one of those fancy beers."

There weren't any cabs just then. We began to walk, and she shivered, and I gave her my jacket to wear on her shoulders.

"You spilled something on your dress," I observed.

She looked down at the splatters, and then she looked at my eyes. "For an old guy, you're kind of handsome."

"Thank you."

Then after a little while, I asked, "What did it feel like? Having the aliens inside your head, I mean."

She didn't exactly answer my question. Instead, she pulled my jacket in close, thinking hard about something. Then with a quiet little voice, she asked me, "Do you ever wonder?"

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"What about?"

"Maybe all of us have these *things* inside us. These little souls. Know what I mean?"

I couldn't quite understand her.

"Souls," she repeated. "Whenever you think, or move, there's not just one of you deciding what to do. It's three of you, or nine of you. I don't know how many. But it's definitely more than just one voice in your head. Think about it, Jim. Doesn't it make sense?"

I had no idea what she was saying, but I was thoroughly intrigued. "Do you mean there were other Glick-Pick who came to Earth?" I guessed. "They visited here long ago...when we were apes or cavemen...and they built colonies right inside our heads?"

She didn't answer, nor did she even seem to hear me.

"That's why we're smart, and human," I continued. "The aliens are still inside us...like mitochondria — ?"

"Like what?" she interrupted. Then she seemed to almost laugh at me, adding, "That sounds like an old movie. I don't mean that at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that we've got different voices. Different ways of thinking. Some tell us, 'Yes,' while the others say, 'No, don't.'"

"Is this what the Glick-Pick told you?"

She pulled her hand out from under my coat, taking hold of my hand. Then with a little shake of the head, she said, "Some of us are missing some of these voices. Who knows why? They're born that way, or they just never hear the voices. Which is why they end up being dangerous people. You see what I'm saying?"

I had a pretty young woman on my arm, and so of course I said, "Sure. I think I understand."

"Do you feel sorry for them?"

"Who? The ones missing pieces of their soul?"

That made Pauline laugh. Then she pulled me close, practically forcing me to grab her breasts, and still laughing, she explained, "No. I'm talking about the poor bastards weighed down with all those extra voices. The voices that keep telling them, 'You'd better not do that.'

"Don't you feel a little sorry for those hen-pecked shits?"

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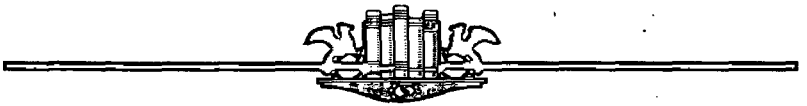

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Time Traveler's Wife, by Audrey Niffenegger, MacAdam/Cage, 2003, $25.

THE TITLE of this book was what made me pick it off the new release shelf in my local bookstore, but it was these sentences from the inside front flap that had me take it to the cash register to buy it:

"*The Time Traveler's Wife* is the story of Clare, a beautiful art student, and Henry, an adventurous librarian, who have known each other since Clare was six and Henry was thirty-six, and were married when Clare was twenty-three and Henry thirty-one. Impossible but true, because Henry is one of the first people diagnosed with Chrono-Displacement Order: periodically his genetic clock resets and he finds himself displaced in time, pulled to moments of emotional gravity from his life, past and future."

Henry has no control over when he disappears, or when in time he'll appear. He arrives naked and has to fend for himself until he's abruptly brought back to the moment when he vanished. That, in itself, makes for fascinating reading, but Niffenegger is more interested in the relationship between these characters, and as we read on, so are we.

I have to admit that the way Clare and Henry first meet and interact felt a little...I don't want to say creepy, exactly, but there was an echo of that for me. Before they "officially" meet (Clare's twenty, Henry's twenty-eight) and begin the relationship that leads to their marriage, a lot of time is spent with an adult Henry visiting Clare as a child becoming a teenager.

Clare's completely enamored with Henry, but nothing untoward takes place; in fact, Henry knows how this can seem and is very careful with their relationship. But of course these constant visits from your future husband are going to make Clare's childhood odd —

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though not as odd as Henry's, with his constant moving through time. Both these formative influences on their characters play a huge role in who they become as they grow older.

Still, I don't want to make the book sound as if it's one-note, or as if it focuses too much on the age discrepancies. It only does so where necessary, and certainly, overall, the relationship between the two characters makes for an exhilarating read—a five-hundred-page book that feels far too short when you get to the end.

Niffenegger jumps back and forth between the characters' viewpoints, and back and forth in time, as well. One of her greatest accomplishments with this book is that all jumbled up as the time-line is, we still get a very clear sense of Clare's and Henry's growth as people. The Henry in his twenties is very different from the Henry in his thirties, and then his forties, and Niffenegger captures those differences in their relative point-of-view sections, while still maintaining a discernable, overall character arc.

There are great joys here, but heartbreaks, too. There's fascinating speculation and a loving attention to detail — both internal and external. There are small truths and large issues, both treated with equal care. There is humor and violence, and there are moments of tender peace.

In short, it has all the makings of a great novel, but more importantly, it delivers on its promise. We should all be so lucky to have a relationship with a loved one as strong as the one portrayed here.

I have no idea how many more books Niffenegger has in her, but I'm afraid this one will cast a tall shadow across whatever she tells next. That said, I'm certainly looking forward to her sophomore effort. If it's even half as good as *The Time Traveler's Wife*, it'll be another winner.

The Saga of Seven Suns: Veiled Alliances, by Kevin J. Anderson, Robert Teranishi & Wendy Fouts-Broome, Wildstorm/DC Comics, 2004, $24.95.

I'm a little unsure of the audience for this graphic novel. The art's terrific, and the storytelling is fine, but while *Veiled Alliances* introduces us to a large cast of interesting characters, and a universe of fascinating aliens and worlds, it doesn't really come to much of a satisfying conclusion. That's because it's a prequel to Anderson's

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The Saga of Seven Suns series. There are two books in the series so far — *Hidden Empire* and *A Forest of Stars* — big, engrossing, prose sf novels.

So, if you want to find out what happens to these folks, you need to switch from graphic story-telling format to regular prose, and I'm not sure the comic book audience will necessarily do so. Just as I'm not sure that the book audience will pick up what's basically a twenty-five-dollar hardcover comic book simply to get some more background on the books they've read and enjoyed.

I could be wrong, and I'm sure the creators and publishers are hoping for both those things to happen.

I hope so, too, because, while *Veiled Alliances* does leave the reader hanging somewhat at the end, it's a gorgeous piece of graphic storytelling and deserves to be seen and read.

The Great Encyclopedia of Faeries, by Pierre Dubois, Simon & Schuster, 2003, $25.

The Runes of Elfland, by Brian Froud & Ari Bark, Abrams, 2003, $25.

The interest in books about fairies and the other denizens of Elfland appears to continue unabated. Here we have a new pair of books from a familiar chronicler of the subject and one who is new — at least to me.

Dubois's book is oversized and crammed with text and art. Since it was originally published in France in 1999, I'm going to assume that this edition is a translation, but if that's the case, whoever translated it did a fine job. The prose has a nice flow to it, and is both detailed and informative in how it deals with its subject matter. I also don't know if the material presented herein is based on actual Franco-European traditions, has been made up, or is some combination of the two. Many of the names and genii of the fairies are unfamiliar to me, but there are certainly echoes of fairy lore from the usual sources to be found throughout.

Appreciation of the art — of which there is plenty; each page is chock-full of portraits and designs — is probably going to be a matter of personal taste. Claudine and Roland Sabatier are certainly skilled, working in a style that's reminiscent of the graphic novels that are so popular in Europe: lots of ink linework, vibrant colors, and a somewhat comic-book feel. I liked it for its expressive range, unusual

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designs, and — often — the sheer audacity of some of their depictions.

Froud's book is a collaboration with Ari Berk (a professor of literature at Central Michigan University who appears to specialize in folklore and myth), but in many ways it appears to be two books. One is an art book, with Froud's usual imaginative fairy figures running rampant, featuring a combination of graphite, colored pencil, ink, and even some collage work. The art doesn't so much appear to illustrate the prose, as inspire and complement it.

The text is a how-to manual for contacting the denizens of the otherworld, based on the runes of Elfland, which bear a striking resemblance to Nordic runes and the runes that Tolkien used in his work. The prose is well-written and personable, but not so informative as in the Dubois book, unless, of course, you're trying to contact fairies and this stuff actually works.

I'd recommend the Dubois book to those who want to expand their library of fairy lore (which should have as its cornerstone the works of Katharine Briggs); the Froud title to those of you who enjoy his art, for there are many new and fascinating images to found in *The Runes of Elfland*.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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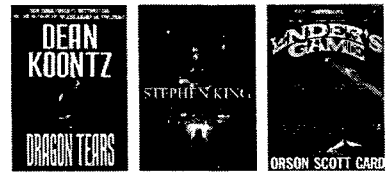

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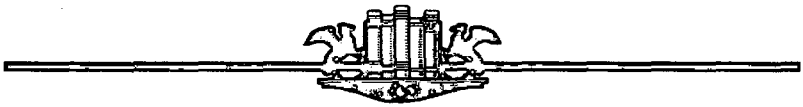

Musing on Books

Michelle West

The Afterlife, by Gary Soto, Harcourt, 2003, $16.

The She, by Carol Plum-Ucci, Harcourt, 2003, $17.

East, by Edith Pattou, Harcourt, 2003, $18.

FAIR warning: School has been underway for three months, and I have two children in grade school. This is a parent short-form way of saying that I've been living in a plague zone. The flu has dominated not our conversations, but our daily lives, and I've been reading only in between those brief stretches in which someone is not feverish or throwing up. Sadly, this past week, that's been *me*.

This particular column is focused on YA novels; there's been an explosion in their publication which hasn't abated, and several extremely noteworthy reprints have been put out: Magic Carpet, the Harcourt YA paperback line, has picked up Patricia McKillip's *Forgotten Beasts of Eld*, her brilliant coming-of-age novel which is about many things, not the least of which is the danger of power fantasy and the personal cost of devoting your life to revenge. Firebird has brought out the following: Pamela Dean's trilogy, *The Hidden Land, The Secret Country*, and *The Whim of the Dragon*, lovely novels about children's fantasy worlds, and the danger of their reality, the mystery of its evocation, and the price and pleasure to be found there; Elizabeth Wein's *The Winter Prince*, one of the best takes on the Arthurian mythos that I've ever read, a story in which not a single word is wasted; Charle's de Lint's *Riddle of the Wren*, possibly my favorite of his many novels. I mention these in brief because they should be read by anyone who enjoys this column, but as they're reprints, with a history of great reviews, I won't say more than that.

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Well, and that they're highly, highly recommended, of course.

Gary Soto's *The Afterlife* touches on themes that have always spoken to me, even from an early age. When I picked it up, the cover-flap blurb drew me in, and I thought that it was going to be two things: a ghost story (which I'm fond of, in the right mood), and a meditation on death. I found Soto's young protagonist compelling almost instantly, given that he's dying a horrible death; he has a very consistent tone, a completely natural way of speaking, that drags a reader along.

But although the protagonist of the book *is* dead, he's not a ghost in the traditional sense of the word; he's a disembodied spirit with an irreverent live personality, a sense of wonder, and a sense of annoyance that the first real date of his life, as planned, just got botched on a big scale. Called Chuy by friends and family, he meets his end at the hands of a knife-wielding man with yellow shoes, who managed to take offense at something Chuy said that wasn't offensive, as far as either I, or Chuy, could tell.

We follow Chuy's literal ascent from his body, as he figures out the ropes of being a dead guy, and watch him wander around Fresno, blown by the wind until he can figure out how to move properly (or hitch a ride), and we listen to his meditations on his state. He's not angry, not really; he's just a bit bummed that he's ended life without really getting a good shot at love.

We meet his family and his friends in glimpses; we see his mother's angry attempt to deal with the loss of her only son; we see his uncle and his cousin try to do the same. His cultural outlook informs the whole of the narrative, up to and including his first view of a *really* cute just-dead girl named Crystal.

Soto is turning the concept of justice on its head, here; the narrator is a very forgiving narrator, and in the end, more concerned with chasing the really cute girl than almost anything else. It works as a character study.

But Soto doesn't try to make sense of death here; he doesn't try to make sense of loss. He doesn't judge, much. It's the book's strength, but it's also the book's weakness — there really isn't a lot of narrative structure, and the episodic nature of bouncing from one place to the next, mixed as it is with a very subtle condemnation of the

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things we do when we're crazy with grief (like, say, try to get revenge) raises more questions than it answers.

Given that the title of the book is *The Afterlife*, and given that it's a very secular few days of afterlife, this shouldn't be surprising — but perhaps because the issues are seriously raised and just as cavalierly dumped by the wayside, again entirely in character for the narrator, one's left at the end feeling that one missed something, or misplaced it; the end is abrupt, and it doesn't offer a book's sense of closure.

Carol Plum-Ucci has a more traditional take on death in *The She*. Of course, in Plum-Ucci's novel, the dead aren't narrating; they're just the driving force behind the lives of two brothers, born several years apart, whose parents die in a terrible boating accident in their native home in West Hook. Their father and mother owned *Goliath*, a freighter that had seen better days, and when Evan was very young, they went out in their ship. A ship-to-shore transmission is the last thing Evan has of his parents, and it's a messy, broken thing. Were it not for the fact that he was young enough to forget, and more important, that his brother Emmett has spent most of his life doing a rationalist's version of just that forgetting, Evan would have been content to leave it at that.

But one night, out for fun, a hard-as-nails, bitter, world-weary girl named Grey spikes a party drink with LSD — and Evan is sent, raving, to recuperate from the horror of that day. Because on *that* day, mired by the customs and beliefs of West Hook, Evan was certain that his parents were killed by the unnatural, watery force the locals call *Ella Diablo*, The She of the title. Evan recovers. Evan doesn't mention what the LSD brought back. But his brother is concerned and watchful, and when Evan, a prankster with a sense of humor that is his answer to boredom, is called in by the principal of his school, things take a turn in a direction that will lead him back to the past.

Grey, the spoiled scion of a very wealthy lawyer, has booked herself into Saint Elizabeth's, a mission-run home for the unhinged. Evan's done some community work with Saint Elizabeth's before, and has helped an abused boy find his footing; the principal wants him to do something similar for Grey. Of course the principal, Mrs. Ashaad, is unaware of Grey's spiking of a drink; she knows only that in the

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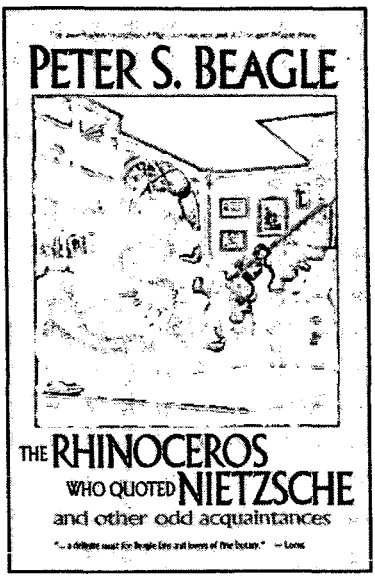
course of Grey's voluntary rehabilitation, Grey has asked to see Evan. Evan almost says no.

But Grey's there because of a boating accident. She and her friend Lydia, girls with a mean streak a mile wide, took a girl scout out boating in West Hook. They rolled their small boat on purpose, just to teach her a thing or two because she's a damn girl scout, a goody-two-shoes kind of happy girl that Grey can't stand — and the girl, who could swim, didn't make it back to the boat; she was sucked in by the water. And all the while she was being sucked down, Grey could hear a hideous, terrible shrieking. One that she's heard about before, from the distraught, LSD-induced hysteria that Evan underwent at her hands.

Grey is *not* a nice girl. She wanted to cause humiliation, misery, and fear — but she *didn't* want to cause death; she's not, as she says, a murderer. Yet. The reason she starts to speak with Evan is because part of her therapy is a list of apologies for past crimes, and she wants to trade apology for information. This probably makes clear just how much of a grasp on "apology" she has. But she's trying.

This book is a terrific blend of a problem novel and a supernatural



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one. Evan is coming of age — and because he is, his brother Emmett finally tells him the truth about their parents. It's a truth that Evan doesn't want to believe. And the lack of that desire is believable because parents, like Santa, are the focal point of our young lives: learning that they're fallible, human, wrong, is always a shock when it first hits, but most of us have the rest of our lives to make the adjustment; Evan's time was cut short so brutally, he has to do it all at once, if he can.

The writing is taut, and laced with a truthful vulnerability and a dark wit; it covers a variety of issues and arguments, and does so without ever stopping in place. I enjoyed it immensely, and couldn't put it down.

But of the three this month, Edith Pattou has most won my heart with her novel, *East*. The cover flap states that it's a retelling of *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, and in some fashion, it is — although it draws on other myths and other fairy tales for ambience. Ebba Rose is a misnamed child. In her family, her mother's superstition is a way of life, and the family superstition goes thus: The direction the parent is facing when the child is born — the eight points of the compass — will decide the child's character for the rest of its life. Her mother is determined to have no North-born children because she was told by a fortune teller that any North-born children she had would be buried in a distant, cold land, but when her favored daughter dies of a childhood illness, and she becomes pregnant again, she wants to replace that daughter with an East-facing girl. The baby comes early, and she is, of course, a North-born girl, a child with wanderlust and a need to explore.

She is adored by her older brother, Neddy, born North-East. She is adored by her father and the rest of her family; she is protected with fearful vigilance by a mother who refuses to remember the direction of her birth. And her life is saved, when she is two, by the appearance of a great, white bear. Neddy sees the bear, then, and he knows it's significant. When times get hard — as they must — and another child falls sick, the bear returns and offers the family the life of their sick daughter in exchange for Rose. The father will hear none of it, but the mother is desperate enough, hysterical enough, that she's willing to accept this trade, and Rose's discovery of

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her true name, and her birth, sends her to the bear, and into the land of magic.

Rose has always loved to weave; it's one of the only domestic things she *does* love. Pattou makes the weaving both magical and mundane. And she understands, truly, what this means.

"...And I realized how much more complicated life is without the benefit of magic.... I thought wistfully of how magic lets you skip over the steps of things. That is what makes it so appealing. But, I thought, the steps of things is where life is truly found, in doing the day-to-day tasks.... Sitting at the table back home and peeling potatoes with my mothers and sisters in companionable silence...."

Broken into several viewpoints and very short chapters, the story of Rose and her White Bear unfolds. It reads in part like *The Snow Queen*, in part like *Beauty and the Beast*, and in part like the story of Cupid and Psyche — which is doing a grave injustice to Pattou, who makes it all her own with a quiet élan. She's not in a hurry; the book isn't written at a breakneck pace. This doesn't mean it's padded or over-wordy; she spends just as much time as she needs, but she takes that time to give details and meaning to the characters, warts and all, for whom she clearly feels such wise affection. Rose makes mistakes, but she blames no one for them but herself; she feels pain, but she's not whiny. She's a lovely, human character, a welcome addition to the canon of retold fairy tales.

In fact, this book reminds me of nothing so much as vintage Robin McKinley, which, given my love of McKinley's work, is high, high praise. It's published as a YA, and will no doubt be shelved that way – but most of McKinley's early hardcovers were published that way as well. Do yourself the great pleasure of hunting it down in hardcover, because you'll want to read it again once you've finished.

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Sheila Finch's new story is a bit more British than our usual fare, but it's certainly to good effect. If any readers come to the end of the story and don't recognize the passenger... well, without giving anything away, let's just say he was more at home in land vehicles than at sea.

So Good a Day

By Sheila Finch

"There must be a beginning of any great matter...."

A LIGHT BREEZE CAME OUT of the north, ruffling the dark water of the Channel. The flotilla of small fishing ketches, pleasure boats, and private yachts struggled across under cover of night. The water was black with a slick sheen of motor oil glinting dimly in starlight, its smell a familiar mix of diesel, salt, and rotting kelp. The owner of the sloop *My Gal Mary* clung to the gunwale, his stomach roiling. Nerves, he told himself, not seasickness. He'd never been seasick in his life.

"Skipper?" Digger held out a steaming thermos mug of tea. "Nice cuppa char'll do you good!"

He disliked being called "Skipper." It seemed pretentious, a name only a Londoner like Digger would use. The man had been playing darts with the locals in the pub in Margate when the major came; he'd been the first to volunteer. The *My Gal Mary* sailed better with two crewing, and he couldn't use his wife for this trip, so he'd reluctantly taken Digger on.

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Surprisingly, the man seemed to know something about sailing — unusual for a Londoner — at least enough to handle the tiller. Judging from Digger's sun-darkened face and hands, he must spend a lot of time outdoors, again not typical.

He cupped both hands around the mug, grateful for its warmth on a chilly night. June already, but it might as well have been November, with a low overcast. Good weather for a rescue operation, but now he wished he'd taken his wife's advice and worn the heavy pullover under his waterproof anorak. He hadn't told Mary where he was headed; she was a fine lass, but she'd have been sick with worry if she'd known. There was a very good chance he might not come back; the major who'd called the meeting at the pub had warned them about that. At least he wasn't being asked to kill men, just bring them home.

The next boat over was the *Moss Rose*, a private yacht twice the length of his sloop, and beyond that he could make out the *Brighton Belle*, more used to puttering up and down the coast with a load of holiday makers down from London than braving the open waters of the nasty-tempered Channel. The old motorized lifeboat from Margate overtook him and left him behind. Hundreds of small boats like these, he thought. Most of them had already picked up their cargo and were heading back to Dover before daybreak; the *My Gal Mary* was one of the last to make the crossing. With luck, there ought to be some navy boats in the pack to cover them, but he wasn't counting on it. It was a dark day for England.

He felt the *Mary* settle and glanced up at the mainsail in time to see it start to luff. The breeze dropped. Ever since he was a little lad, he'd been sensitive to the wind's vagaries, knowing long before the telltales did that it was going to shift. The boom went loose. He took up the mainsheet and trimmed the sail, but there wasn't enough wind left to fill it. The *Mary*'s motor was small and balky, a luxury to make docking a sailboat in tight quarters easier; it would have to work hard tonight. The little petrol tank had been full when they left the harbor at Margate, but if the wind didn't cooperate, he'd have a tough time getting to the French coast and back without running out of fuel. He lowered the sail and furled it neatly. The motor spluttered messily to life on the second try.

He heard the drone of a frustrated Messerschmidt overhead, above the

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clouds, and saw Digger glance up at the overcast sky. He gave the Londoner a thumbs-up.

Then a tear opened in the cloud cover, and in the sudden gap he saw the fighter bank and turn, diving down to strafe the vulnerable sailboat, heard the heavy drone of its engine, the rat-tat of its guns —

There was something the matter with his head now, a pounding in his temples like a drum. He had the oddest sensation of floating away from his body in the rising wind —

"Take it easy, Skipper." Digger caught his arm and eased him down to the deck.

He looked up into a dark face that was eager, hungry.

"It's your time," Digger said.

It was the last thing he knew before the wind carried him away.

"The wind commands me away."

THE END WAS SUDDENLY upon him. Death came to sit in his cabin.

Wind blustering out of the northeast moaned in the rigging. The sea rose and fell, rose and fell, the *Defiance* at anchor a handful of leagues east of Buena Ventura island, near the ruins of Nombre de Dios. The times and the seas were not as he remembered them, as once, a young man, he had encountered them, neither as kind nor as steady. His last expedition, and a failure. He was far from England and would never round Plymouth Hoe again.

"So it has come to this," Drake said.

Death inclined his bare head courteously, dark curls tightly clustered.

The lantern over Drake's cot flickered. The air in the cabin was thick and hot, giving little comfort to his labored breath. The hourglass lacked a few turns till dawn.

"We are old shipmates, then?"

"We have sailed together since Nombre de Dios," Death agreed.

"And at Nombre de Dios shall it end?"

His brow was hot and wet with the fever that had come upon him. The bloody flux, they called it. He heard them whispering when they thought he slept, Jonas and Thomas Webb. But he was not done yet.

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"William!" he commanded, breath rasping in his throat, fingers clutching at the bulkhead for purchase as he tried to rise. "William, I say! Fetch me my armor. I will die as I have lived, a soldier for her majesty."

Death stretched out a dark hand, easing him back on the cot. "Peace. The page hears you not."

He stared at the figure wrapped in a sailor's foul-weather cloak, watchmate on many a wind-torn night, the perilous ocean rolling beneath the ship, steadfast companion encompassing the world.

"Water," he said, weakness returning.

Death took the cup and leaned forward, giving drink; his free hand stroked the damp hair on the dying man's hot brow, his touch gentle as a woman's.

After a while, Drake said, "Pirate, the Spaniard called me, and spoke truth. I have killed many men. Though they were papists and idolaters, I fear God may yet hold me to His reckoning."

Death held up a mirror. "Look."

He looked, and was instantly carried away to the past.

Shortly before dawn on the twenty-eighth of July, the *Pasco* riding at anchor in the bay on a windless night, the Moon broke free of the clouds. Nombre de Dios lay revealed, dark shadow against dark Caribbean coast, the treasure house of the world that would be his before night fell again. He had given up the slaving runs with his kinsman John Hawkins, for he had seen greater profit in raiding along the mouth of the Chagres River where the treasure came down from Panama to be loaded for the voyage home to Spain.

He could not afford further delay. He had learned that the town was heavily fortified against an expected attack from the *cimarrones,* runaway Negro slaves who had established their own villages outside Spanish control. His men were so few against so many. Now was the time to move, while surprise remained his weapon.

On the beach, he divided the force, one group to approach the town along the main street with himself, another to come in from the flank with his brother John. They were armed with pike and bow, spear and arquebus. Flame sprang from the tallow-soaked rags on the firepikes, giving more smoke than light. Two trumpeters raised their trumpets, preparing to give

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voice, and before them all went the boy with the drum making a joyful noise. Drake smiled. God grant the good folk of Nombre de Dios not learn how few their noisy attackers were!

Already he could hear bells pealing out warning of invasion. Shouts echoed as the town awoke to its peril. His heart raced with the promise of papist treasure to be taken. He never felt more alive than at moments like this at the start of battle, unless it was a fight at sea.

"For England!" he cried to the men.

And for their own pockets too, if the fabled treasure house yielded all that was told of it. Gold and silver and jewels waiting to be carried back to Spain's king.

They reached the market place as the Sun's first rays touched the little church's bell tower. The *alcalde*, a balding, middle-aged man in disheveled dress as though he had risen hastily from his bed, stood with the town's militia, a mixed group of Spanish settlers and Negro slaves. A volley of shot greeted Drake's party and one trumpeter went down instantly. Seeing his companion fall, the boy with the drum hesitated. This was the lad's first voyage; he was hardly a year older than Drake's own youngest brother, Joseph, and had never seen battle. Drake seized his shoulder, pushing him back behind the armed men.

Yelling from both sides — shot flying over his head — he heard a scream as one found its target. A Spaniard down. His men charged forward, pikes ready to taste blood.

He felt a sudden, fierce pain take him in the right thigh and for a moment sound blurred and the world misted over. He slumped to one knee, breath gone from his lungs. Then he regained control and clapped a hand to his thigh to hold in the pain, unwilling to have his men see him weakened.

"Captain?" The drummer lad said. "Captain, look!"

At the other side of the market square, his brother's men appeared, howling like the dogs of war. The Spaniards threw down their weapons and ran away. But Drake knew it would not be long before they realized how few were the men who had routed them. No time to waste.

The Spaniards had abandoned the slaves who fought with them, and the Africans now stood about hesitantly, uncertain of their fate. One of these Africans, taller than the rest, drew Drake's attention. Ignoring the

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throb of his leg wound, Drake limped over to the slave. There were those, his kinsman Hawkins among them, who believed God had not made the African fully human, and it was therefore no sin to sell them into servitude.

"You, good sir." He used a mixture of English and gestures, Spanish being a tongue that poisoned his lips to speak. "Have you a name?"

The slave did not lower his eyes. "Diego."

"Then, Diego, you shall lead us to the house of the *alcalde.*"

The slave turned without a word and led them to a house not far from the marketplace. It was deserted. The men crowded inside. Silver graced the tables and sideboards, candlesticks and serving trays and chased dishes from which the *alcalde's* family supped. The room was thick with the smell of burning candles. Drake felt dizzy. The men began to pile up the silver, ready to carry it off.

Not enough! he thought, squinting against the stab of reflected light. Here were trinkets, yet he sought treasure. Too little here to risk the return of the Spaniards.

"Cease!" he commanded. The effort to form words made him tremble; he clenched his hands to hide their betrayal. "Be not distracted by small reward. Think what riches are stored in the king's warehouse by the water."

The men turned to him, astonished.

"Aye," one grumbled, "yet they say — "

Drake cut him off. "I have brought you to the mouth of the treasure house of the world. Henceforth, you shall have none to blame but yourselves if you fail to take it."

All who served Drake knew of his hot temper and avoided its sting. They filed out of the house in silence, but he felt their hidden resentment. Outside, a wave of nausea came over him from the wound he had taken. He could not feel his leg, did not know how he would put one leg in front of the other. He was not afraid of dying in the service of England, but — please God — not now when the great voyage of his life had just begun.

The day that had broken fair a few hours ago turned stormy, and a heavy rain pelted them, soaking the powder in their weapons. Every moment that passed allowed the Spaniards to overcome their terror and return to the attack. In spite of pain, he forced himself to go forward.

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He felt a hand steadying his elbow and looked up into the impassive face of the black slave. A memory came to him at that. He had been with his kinsman in Rio de la Hacha, a few years ago, where another Negro slave defected from his masters and guided them to hidden Spanish treasure. The English and the Negro slaves, he understood, had a common enemy. But when the English sailed away with their gold, Hawkins abandoned the man, and Drake could only suppose the Spaniards put him to death.

"There is berth on the *Pasco*, and work to put a hand to," he said.

Diego stared at him for a moment, then inclined his head silently.

"You are wounded, Captain!" the drummer lad exclaimed, pointing at the sand where Drake's footsteps were marked with blood.

The rain had ceased, but it seemed to him a heavy fog rolled in, clouding his vision and sealing his ears. A roaring like a great bore tide filled his head. *The wind,* he thought, the wind that commanded a ship away.

The last thing he saw before he fell was the face of the African slave.

"Thou wouldst have taken me so soon, Master Death?" he said, lapsing into the speech of his childhood. He held one hand over his eyes, for the flickering light pained him. The *Defiance* rolled gently in the Caribbean swell.

Death reached for the lantern and turned down the flame. "It was time."

"By what grace did I live?"

"Some bargain with me at the hour of their death and some offer gifts."

"I spared a slave," Drake said. "A small enough deed."

Afterward, his brother had abandoned the plan to storm the treasure house of Nombre de Dios. Instead, they had carried him back to the *Pasco,* valuing his life higher than all the gold that might have lain behind the strong doors.

Beneath the stout timber of *Defiance,* the dark sea rolled, rocking him like a babe at his mother's breast. How well he knew these waters! Yet all had changed, and not for the better, and in truth he knew it no longer. What had been once a delicious and pleasant arbor was now a waste and desert wilderness. A spasm wracked his body and blood came to speckle his lips. He gasped for air to fill his tortured lungs.

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After a moment, he found breath to say, "You spared my life, kind Master Death, and I would know if my soul were worth the saving."

"Think you it was not?" Death asked.

He turned his head away. "I am no papist, yet I feel the weight of lives I have taken and would discharge it — if t'were possible — before I am carried to my Maker."

The mirror reappeared in Death's hand.

THEY HAD BEEN MARCHING for seven days through a thick and tangled jungle so green it seemed more artifice than nature, the rain's drip constant on their heads. His nose filled with the heavy scent of vivid blossoms, their colors more brazen than any that grew in his garden in Devon. Mud sucked at his boots, and his pack grew heavier, though not as heavy as those the *cimarrones* bore. In the half-year since he had taken the wound at Nombre de Dios, he had forged an alliance with these outlaws, for their zeal to strike papists was equaled only by his own.

The Spanish fleet had arrived. Treasure now flowed across the isthmus of Panama to be loaded for Spain, and his enemy must surely expect him to attack. Yet this time he had decided to interrupt the flow of wealth not by sea but on land. This venture must succeed; fate had not been kind to him so far, and his men grew restless. Nor had he escaped unscathed; though he had survived, his brother John had not.

Tiny creatures he could not name slid past his feet, and popinjays shrieked overhead, brightly plumed as the rainbow. He thought of his young wife, Mary, at home in Plymouth; on his return, he would tell her of these wonders and she would smile, only half-believing. Nor gold nor Spaniards defeated amused her, yet the tale of a bird like a rainbow could widen her eyes. His own eye was caught by a flash of crimson and emerald underfoot, and he stopped before his boot could crush it. He put the feather in his pack for Mary, who would treasure it above rubies.

They kept to the undergrowth to avoid giving notice of their approach. He knew his men would sooner brave the fiercest storm at sea than this damp, unhealthy land, and the lad with the drum made heavy walking of it. The *cimarrones*, thirty dark men burning with hate for their former masters, seemed untouched by heat or rain. He had come to admire their

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strength carrying heavy loads and cutting trail. Their courage to risk all in this enterprise was not unlike that of his own Devon men. How then, he wondered, could a man say the Lord God had wrought in them a lesser creation? Surely the soul of an African weighed as heavily in the palm of God's hand as that of any Englishman.

He thought about this as he walked. He did not hesitate to steal gold and burn ship or town. He gloried in destroying idolatrous statues, tapestried altars, window glass bearing glowing symbols of the devil's handiwork. Yet he thought it sin to kill without cause, freeing his captives after he had taken their wealth if they did not defy him. The *cimarrones* desired revenge as he desired riches.

His plan was to ambush the mule trains that carried the treasure across the isthmus to the port of Nombre de Dios. If God willed, he would gain great wealth for England but spill little blood.

Shortly before the band reached the isthmus, Diego took him aside and brought him to a high hill where he saw an enormous old tree. Popinjays fluttered in its branches. The rain had stopped and the Sun now poured golden light down from a sky so intensely blue it hurt his eyes. He set his pack down and wiped sweat off his brow. The African pointed to steps cut into the trunk leading to a platform of planks lashed together high overhead. Curious, he went up, scattering the noisy birds.

From the platform, he found himself looking east over the familiar Caribbean, dotted with palm-fringed islands and galleons plying their way to and from the ports of the Spanish Main. But on the western side of the isthmus he saw a vast, empty expanse of blue water, an ocean no Englishman had ever looked upon. A wind he did not know teased the tops of the waves into whitecaps. He sensed its salt breath beckoning him to hoist sail and run before it into the most secret places of the world. The enormity of this strange unknown pulled at his heart, thrilling him. What treasure lay beyond those waves? A treasure not of mere gold and silver but of new things never seen or thought before.

"Riches there," Diego said. "Gold — spice — slaves. A man might seize destiny. Make himself a god."

He pulled his gaze away from the ocean and met the African's eyes. Something passed between them, but he knew not what it was, only that what must be would be. "There are no gods but the Lord Christ."

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Afterward, Drake set up camp a day's journey from Panama and planned an ambush. Three mule trains were to pass along the trail by the Chagres River that evening on their way to the harbor. He commanded one half of his band, under John Oxenham, to lie hidden in the long grass at one point along the mule path and urged them to silence; he with the other would wait a little farther ahead. When the convoy was safely past the first band, Oxenham's men would close in behind, and with the others rising up in its path, he would catch them like rabbits in his trap, relieve them of their precious burden and let them go.

A breeze too light to fill the highest topgallant brought the tinkling of mule bells down the trail and the faint sound of voices calling out in Spanish. He judged they were almost at the point where they would pass Oxenham's group.

Then he heard the sound of a horse's hooves. He peered through the brush in the moonlight and made out a single rider, coming down the path from the opposite direction.

"Let him pass," he whispered to his men.

The rider passed Drake without breaking stride, and though the horse pricked its ears, catching the scent of hidden men, the rider seemed unaware of the peril. All would be well —

A shout!

He heard the Spaniard urging his horse to the gallop toward the oncoming mule train not yet inside the trap. Then a babble of confused voices, English and Spanish, and he knew all was lost. The rider had given warning. The mule train turned away from the ambush.

Anger surged through him. How had this come to pass? Who was to blame?

Oxenham came up the path with two sailors holding a third between them; the offender's head slumped in shame. The *cimarrones* muttered amongst themselves. His own fury roared like a fire within his breast till he could hardly think. All preparation wasted! So much time lost!

"Hastening to spill enemy blood, he lost all for us," a soft voice said at his ear. "What to do?"

He turned to Diego. The African's eyes seemed to open on the deeps of a vast and dangerous destiny. He sensed a challenge that both excited

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and repelled. Then it passed. A sudden gust brought sea smell to him, green and fecund, cleansing his anger.

"Captain," Oxenham said. "By your command, the lash? Or give the word and I shall cut this knave's throat!"

Tears ran down the bloated cheeks of the man who had given warning. A drunkard, Drake saw, not a traitor.

He walked away.

"Aye," he said, remembering. "They would have taken a scapegoat and killed him for the ill luck that befell us on that voyage."

The *Defiance* trembled under him as though startled in her turn by the past, and the lantern sputtered and went out.

"You stayed the hand of those who would kill the offender," Death said. "It was a merciful decision."

Drake fell to coughing again; Death wiped the spittle from his lip.

"Thought you I were bloody-minded, old friend?" Drake asked when breath returned. "What does it profit a man to spill the blood of fools and drunkards?"

"Or papists?" Death asked.

Drake sighed. "We are English, well disposed even to our enemies if there be no cause to the contrary."

The sickness raged in his bowels again, and he desired his end. Then he put up a hand. "Nay, kind Master Death. I do fear my Maker, for I have much blood on my hands and no time left to wipe it clean."

"Power is mine in this world, to carry away when I choose. Yet in the next I have no dominion," Death said.

Drake turned his head away, listening to the wind's voice in the rigging. A good breeze rising — but he would never sail before it again. "Then my soul shall be weighed in the balance, and the fires of hell attend my coming. Away then! I will not keep the good demons waiting."

Death lifted his hands and the mirror flashed in the dim cabin with a light of its own.

"There is more," Death said.

The natives came down the hillside out of the gray fog that had shrouded this cold Pacific coast since the *Golden Hind* dropped anchor.

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Overhead red hawks floated, their cries piercing Drake's heart with melancholy. He had sailed north along land unknown even to the Spaniards till the astrolabe told forty-eight degrees latitude. He had been searching for a passage back to the Atlantic, but instead of opening east, the land headed west, and the weather was so cold meat froze as it was taken from the cooking fire. Then he turned the *Hind* and sailed south again, and near thirty-eight degrees he found a small bay to shelter in. He had been at sea two years on this voyage, and sometimes he feared he would never see the green hills of Devon again. But he was careful not to let the men catch his doubt.

He gazed at the oncoming natives. They were a formidable company adorned in animal hides and shells, wearing tall hats of woven reeds. The men's faces were painted in fierce designs, and they were armed with spears and bows, but at the rear he saw women and children. He judged they were not a war party, for nowhere had he found warriors who brought their families to battle. He waited to see what would happen, watching the wet mist curl through tall pines, hearing the hawks' voices and the boom and hiss of the sea at his back, smelling its salt tang.

He needed time to scrape the *Hind*'s hull and caulk it, and time to gather provision for the great voyage across the Pacific that lay ahead. The vessel was loaded with gold and silver, but he needed the fresh water, fruit, and venison this land might provide; he hoped he would not have to shed blood for them. He had taken in hand an enterprise that he knew not in the world how to go through with, yet he knew neither regret nor fear. All that he did was for England's sake. He asked only that God allow him to serve his country till his last day.

The natives halted, and one took it upon himself to deliver a long speech, not one word of which Drake understood. But he was skilled at reading the intention that men hid behind their words, and in this the natives were no different than English gentlemen or Spanish knaves. It was his way to return courtesy when courtesy was offered, bloodshed when treachery threatened. After a while he knew they intended no harm.

For a moment, Englishmen and natives stared at each other, then he who seemed to be the leader by virtue of wearing the tallest hat indicated all should sit, and all sat. Two of the natives advanced toward Drake and

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decorated his neck with chains of woven grasses intertwined with shells. They put a tall hat on his head as if it were a crown, and a carved branch into his hand for a scepter. They bowed, and he nodded his good will back to them. Now his sailors laughed, nervously at first, then with growing pleasure.

"They make you king — give you all," Diego said softly in his ear.

Drake shook his head, troubled by the African's words. Were this Spanish land, he would capture it and subdue the enemy who inhabited it with a joyful heart and light conscience. Yet these natives greeted him in peace, and in peace he must return the greeting.

He lifted his hand and the drummer beat a soft tattoo as the young boys in his company, cabin boys and pages of the gentlemen aboard, came forward with gifts in their turn. Hats with ribbons they carried, small knives, and a mirror of burnished metal for the tribe's leader. He gave orders that the men should treat these natives with courtesy, and not abuse them in the fashion of Spaniards. Yet to the *Hind*'s pastor he allowed the occasion to speak a little of the Lord, for though the natives' ears might not understand the holy words yet their hearts would surely let Him in. Thus the day passed with feasting and music from the ship's musicians, and much merriment between the two companies. At nightfall, the natives withdrew in peace.

Afterward, Drake walked on the narrow beach with Diego, foul-weather cloaks wrapped tightly about both men's shoulders against the damp air. In truth he preferred this misty climate, for the cold was more suited to English blood than the disease-laden air of the Caribbean. And did it not have low white cliffs separating sea from land, very much like those he remembered from England's coast? A small wind lifted out of the west, calling him back to sea.

"A fair land and an honest folk in it," he said.

"A man might build a stout fortress here, Captain," Diego said.

He glanced at the tall African. Diego had been with him seven years, yet this night he thought how little he knew the man.

"This man might take the land. Live as a king."

"Nay," Drake said, laughing. "Tempt me not in jest, my friend."

"They that oppose shall be easily overthrown."

A hard light lit Diego's eyes, and Drake felt the feather touch of

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unease. The African enjoyed the thought of killing. Had he not recognized that when first they met?

"I am no *conquistador,*" Drake said. "I find this land freely given to England's queen. Its name shall be Nova Albion."

"You could have been a king," Death said.

In *Defiance*'s dark cabin, Death's right hand now held a golden balance, the bowls carved in the likeness of the two hands of God.

"I am ready." It had been a full life and, though he would not live to see three score years, well spent. Some called him pirate, yet the queen had knighted him in London for his service. "Prithee, good Master Death, how does my life weigh in the balance?"

"Judgment is not given to me. I do but show what is."

Death's left hand tipped the golden bowls and they wavered, up, down, up, down. Then one turned dark and sank low. Blood and fire flickered in it, the clang of weapon against weapon, the sound of wounded men's screams in darkness. Hatred and vengeance and the lust for treasure swarmed like petty devils in the bowl, and Drake sickened to look upon them.

"These speak against you, Captain."

He stared at the dark face, reading Death's hunger. He spoke uneasily. "I cannot undo these things I have done. Nor would I, if t'were given to me to do over. I have lived as I have seen best, a gentleman and a Christian, and a servant of my queen."

It seemed to him then that he heard the faint sound of music somewhere on the *Defiance.* He had always loved music, pipe and drum and lute, and never set sail without musicians aboard. But it was only the wind soughing through the ship's lines.

Death's left hand touched the golden bowls again, and this time a bright one came to rest below its mate. Light spilled over its rim, banishing shadow from the cabin. Now Drake heard joyful voices: *cimarrones* singing in their villages; the natives of his own Nova Albion, never seen again but in his dreams. God's children all. He saw the faces of all the mariners he had let live, soldiers whose lives he had spared after battle, slaves he had freed, his first wife Mary whom he had truly loved, all together as though it were but one day passing. The stars that had guided his life's voyage filled this bowl with light.

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"This too you have wrought," Death said.

"Touch thy finger to this side, good Master Death. Mayhap it will weigh heavier and carry me up to heaven!"

Death's voice seemed to come from a long way off, and his speech was the gentler speech of Drake's childhood. "Stuck thou art, twixt heaven and hell."

"Purgatory? Nay, Master Death." Drake closed his eyes. "Give me no papist teaching at the end."

"I have one boon to grant. Thy sleep shall be long till England needs thee. On that dark day you shall answer her call and rise again to defend her."

Already he could feel himself separating from his pain-wracked body, streaming away from the world he had loved so well. "Sleep, you say? As Arthur sleeps in his lake till he needs must come again?"

Death inclined his head and Drake saw what he had not seen before, that the years had brought no gray to thread his old companion's black curls. And he saw too the lust for killing in Death's eyes, an appetite for harvesting men's lives.

"We chased the Spaniard's armada out of the Narrow Sea," Drake said. "He will not soon come again."

"Perchance not soon, mayhap not from Spain."

"On guard for England," he said, wondering at it. Then he laughed. "No purgatory, this!"

Now his vision shifted, and he saw as though he were high up, looking through sea mist, that men had entered his cabin, Jonas, and Thomas Webb, others too. He watched from afar as they lifted his body into the lead coffin they had prepared. He saw tears on their cheeks, and the faces of his men cast down in grief. They spoke, but the wind seized their words. A strong wind, he thought, a wind commanding him away.

A young lad beat the drum slowly as they carried the coffin on deck. It made little splash in the blue water of the Caribbean.

"Hear me now, England," Drake said. "In that day of thy need, I shall return. For nothing pleases me better than to see the enemy flying with a southerly wind to the northward!"

The coffin sank away from sight.

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"...until it be thoroughly finished."

THE SEA ROLLED UNDER HIM and a fine spray came over the bow. Drake's eyes flew open. He was half lying on the deck of a small boat, half leaning against a man's leg. The dark breath of the water brought him fully awake and he sat up.

"No water on this round globe but the Narrow Sea smells so putrid!"

"Got that right, Skipper," a familiar voice agreed. "The Channel it is."

He looked up at Diego. The man's face was dark, yet not as black as he remembered it.

"And you, it seems, like the good popinjays of Panama, do swiftly learn to ape the native tongue." He put a hand on the gunwale and pulled himself up. Then he stared down at the jacket he was wearing with its unfamiliar fastenings. "Is this the fashion of London?"

"You've slept a long time," Diego said.

He thought about that, finding no memory from that sleep; no dreams had come to haunt it, mayhap because he had not been truly dead. Then he became aware of the thin trickle of blood from his left temple. "It seems I have taken a wound."

"The man that owned the clothes and this boat's dead."

"And it profits me naught to ask why my return must cost a man his life?"

"No."

Drake searched his mind but found no name for the man he had become. Then the strangeness of it caught him, and his breath stopped in his throat. He remembered a hammock on the *Defiance*, the lad with the drum, the coffin lowered into the blue waters of the Caribbean — his coffin! Yet here he was, alive, in another man's body. The notion chilled.

He turned quickly, banishing the uneasy thoughts, to peer out over the water, narrowing his eyes against fog and darkness. Here and there he made out shiny patches, as if shards of a black mirror drifted out to sea. Somewhere out there, he sensed the presence of a multitude of ships but could not see any of them. He listened for the telltale creak of wooden hulls and masts, the sough of breeze in rigging, the damp flap of sailcloth.

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All that came to his ears was a strange low rumbling that he could not identify. There was an echoing throb in the deck under his boots and an odd smell. There was no sail hoist up the sloop's one mast, yet he sensed the forward motion.

"So small a boat against the Spaniard! Shall I command from this?"

Diego sat in the stern, one hand on the tiller. "We sail with everything we can find to rescue a defeated army."

"England in defeat? I take no pleasure in those words."

"I've been busy," Diego admitted.

Drake gazed at Diego's face, the dark eyes lit for just a moment with an inhuman lust. "Perchance I shall have occasion to cheat you of some booty, old pirate."

After a while, the sky lightened with approaching dawn, and in the milky haze he saw a strange sight. Hundreds of boats — many of them hardly bigger than the one he found himself on. Most carried no sails or masts to hoist a sail. The vibration he felt underfoot was odd, yet familiar too. He thought of the leat he'd built to bring water to Plymouth, and the mills he'd owned on its bank, the great wooden wheels lumbering under the rush of water and shaking the floor. A wheel that moved a ship, could that be?

"Yes," Diego said, as if privy to Drake's thought. "As far beyond the alchemy of your day as the arquebus was to your ancestor's long bow."

"What am I to do here?"

"You'll see, Skipper. Don't you worry!"

Diego kept the boat on course with an ease that brought to Drake's mind their days on the *Golden Hind*, his favorite vessel. The African had taken advantage of calm seas encircling the Spice Islands to study the art of the helmsman. Indeed, he realized now, Diego had the helm on the night when the *Hind* drove with a terrible shock onto a reef, threatening to drown all who sailed on her. It had been no easy task to prevent Death from claiming the greater part of his crew. He had not guessed in those days who sailed with him harboring such an appetite.

Shortly before dawn, the low coast of France loomed, unwelcoming as ever he remembered it, now overhung with a thick pall of black smoke. In the gray light he saw the stone walls and jetties of a harbor where dozens of ships crowded to enter. The tips of masts of sunken ships dotted the

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entrance; the flotilla must thread its way between them. Men's urgent shouts filled the air. He saw hundreds of men — thousands — waiting on the moles and the narrow beach beside the harbor, jostling, clambering aboard the waiting vessels.

Lord Christ! he thought. *What devil's work be here!*

"Now we wait our turn," Diego said.

His heart filled with despair at the enormity of the task he had come back to perform. "Methinks I see a contest loom between us, Master Death, for you would take and I would save."

"No contest," Diego said easily. "We've come to rescue one man."

"But one? He needs must be a prince!"

Noise overhead drew his attention. He saw the strangest sight — two small craft like steel birds swooping and diving, filling the air with thunder. Nothing he knew from his life could explain them, yet he understood at once these birds were bent on destruction beyond his imagining. He knew instinctively something so terrible sprang from the mind of Death himself.

"'Twas all a game then?" he said with sudden insight. "You spared my life and sailed with me not because I freed a slave. Nay. To see how you might tempt me to feed your appetite for souls!"

"I always win in the end," Diego said.

"Aye, that you do!" Drake said sourly. "But the game is to see how long a man may put off that end, is it not? You play with men's souls as a cat with a mouse."

Diego shrugged.

They waited their turn, maneuvering in circles. The water had turned rough in the narrow entrance, roiled by the passage of so many vessels, and the little boat rocked in the turbulence. A smoky, oily smell came from the cloudy water. But at last Diego steered cleanly between overloaded boats heading out again, threading between docks already crammed with ships. Drake fixed his mind on the task at hand, standing ready in the bow, mooring line coiled in his grasp. The dock they approached was deserted except for one last group of three men, hurrying to take their place in the rescue.

Diego pointed. "There's our man."

The man was average height, a little stocky of build, with a suggestion

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of muscles under a drab jacket, and a flat black cap worn at an angle on his head. His movements spoke of an easy sense of authority, the confidence of a man born to lead. He could have been a Devon Sea Dog, Drake thought, liking him for it. The throbbing underfoot stopped, and Drake tossed the mooring line. The man in the black cap caught it without fumbling. The boat bumped softly against the seaweed-slick stone.

Another of Death's angry bird-craft came swooping in. Drake heard the unmistakable sound of shot whistling past his ears, saw the fountains of dust as the shot hit dirt. The craft pulled up at the last minute, saving itself before hitting the ground, and climbed back into the gray dawn. Death, it seemed, had brought many hellish marvels to the world since he had been gone. It pained him not at all to have lacked them in his time.

He looked back at the little group, recognizing the haunted eyes of those who had seen too many battles, and that he understood. One had an arm in a makeshift sling, another leaned on a crutch, his foot a bloody stump. The man he had come to rescue seemed uninjured.

"How many can you take?" the man shouted over the noise of the retreating steel bird.

Before Drake could answer, Diego spoke. "Sorry, guv. We've come for just one."

"Then take the two injured," the man shot back. "Between 'em they'll make your one!"

Drake frowned. The vessel was small but would suffice for five. "Mayhap — "

"One," Diego repeated.

"Sir," one of the injured men protested. "You go!"

"No. There'll be another boat — "

"Doubt it, guv," Diego said. "We're the end of the queue."

"More reason to load us and get away then!"

Diego suddenly leaned over the gap between the boat and the gray stone — impossibly far! Drake thought — and seized the man's arm, dragging him over the gunwale. And at the same time, Death's steel bird dove out of the sky toward them again and the hail of shot rained down.

The three of them fell in a heap in the cockpit. Her bow line unsecured, the little sailboat drifted away from the dock on the pull of the ebb tide. Diego recovered quickly and seized the tiller; the rumbling that

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drove the boat forward started again, and Diego turned her in the narrow channel, heading back to open water. Drake dragged himself up on hands and knees to stare at the spot on the dock where this man had stood a moment before. Two men lay motionless.

"Bastards!" the stranger growled.

"Take it easy, guv," Diego said. "Before this war ends, there'll be millions more like them."

"And shall your hunger be sated then?" Drake asked with heat. "Nay. You must needs forgive my outburst. It nothing serves a man to be angered by a spirit!"

The man they had rescued stared at each of them in turn. He had dark, intense eyes that seemed to take the measure of a man. But he said nothing.

"Ahoy the *My Gal Mary!*" a voice called.

Drake stared across water churning at the mouth of the harbor to a long, dark-painted ship, low in the water, a hull only, no sails. A sailor in a white cap stood on its deck, holding a metal cone to his lips.

"Ahoy!" Drake replied, cupping his hands to his mouth

"Routes Z and X are out of commission," the sailor said through the cone. "Repeat, don't attempt Z or X."

"What'll it be instead, mate?" Diego called back.

"Take route Y."

"Right-o! Route Y's it, then."

"You're the tail end," the sailor said. "Good luck!"

Drake shook his head. "What is this talk of letters?"

"It's why you came, Skipper," Diego said cheerfully. "The way home — and this old tub's about to run out of petrol."

The rumbling beneath Drake's feet sputtered and faded out. The *My Gal Mary* slowed, rocking in the choppy water.

"You said it yourself once, Skipper. No one better than you at sailing."

The man they had rescued seemed to have recovered his composure. "Route Y's more than twice as long as the best crossing. Eighty-seven miles, Dunkirk to Dover, instead of Route Z's thirty-nine. If they're sending us that way, the Hun must've been busy last night on the other two."

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"Hun?" Drake said. "In my day we called him the Don."

"Different enemy," Diego said. He leaned down to a locker under the cockpit seat and took out a rolled chart. "A bit more detailed than in your day, Skipper, but you oughta be able to make it out."

The Sun perched on the shoulder of the harbor buildings as Drake unrolled the chart and spread it on the little cabin's roof. He stared at the mix of familiar and unfamiliar terms; compass rose and fathoms, these he knew. The route Diego's finger indicated traveled far to the north, where the already agitated waters of the Narrow Sea opened to the North Sea itself. There, he would have to turn west where the channel widened and the currents coming together fought for dominance. This small boat would be tossed and imperiled, not meant for such a watery battle. It would take much skill.

Near the line showing the coast at Margate he saw a symbol he did not recognize.

"Lightship," Diego said when Drake's finger paused on the symbol. "Top of the Goodwin Sands, remember them? Another one there at the bottom. You could've used a lightship out by the Spice Islands, eh, Skipper?"

He stared at Diego's smiling face. How came he ever to think this malevolent spirit a friend?

"And after that, another treacherous stretch down to Dover," Diego added.

"In darkness," Drake said thoughtfully. "The Sun will set before we reach Dover. So be it. I have sailed with less."

"I don't know who you are," the man they had rescued said levelly. "And I have a feeling I don't want to know. But if you can get me back to England, I'll be in your debt."

Drake looked up at the sky, still hazy but the fog almost gone. The freshening wind stung his cheek, carrying the scent of kelp and fish. A wind out of the south, blowing to the north, as it had on that day of his glory aboard the *Revenge,* smashing the Don's armada. His heart flooded with elation; he was alive, and at sea. To how many men was given the boon to live again, even for only a day? He had no doubt that Death would devour him once more when his task was completed. No matter the craft was small, the enemy not the one he had expected. England needed him.

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God willing, he would answer her need.

"Stand ready to hoist sail," he said. "And *I* shall command the helm!"

In the hours that followed, he knew a joy he had not known since he was a lad idling away the long summer days in Plymouth harbor in his first small cockleboat. The *Mary* was sweet-tempered as his own young wife had been, turning lightly with the wind and running hard and true over the gray water. On the horizon, he saw other ships, most of them several times the size of the one he sailed, and he chuckled. If the Spaniard should see him now! But he had always known it was not the size of the ship that counted, or the size of the fleet, but the size of a man's heart.

Guns spoke from the French coast as they passed, and he marveled at the heavy power of their voices. If he had but one like that, he thought, how much sooner the Don's fortifications on the Spanish Main would have fallen to him! He was not within the guns' reach for long.

Some hours later, he saw the buoy that marked the northern tip of the route Diego had shown him. Here he turned the *Mary* and prepared to sail west; waves slapped the bow as the little boat came about, and spray flew against his face. He was too far off the coast of the Low Countries for landmarks but needed no compass to tell him direction. He knew it by the light in the hazy sky and the wind and the roll of the waves. Now his knowledge of these waters and his skill in sailing must come into play to keep the boat heading west against strong currents that would push him now north, now south.

The wind veered and the boat heeled over. At Drake's nod, Diego eased the mainsheet, spilling wind out of the sail, and she righted. *Softly, softly!* he told himself, old skills coming back; too much heel and she would lose her speed. His main concern was the weather, for squalls raked the Narrow Sea without warning in summer. He squinted up at the sky but saw no threatening thunderheads, only an occasional Death's bird droning its way across. Now he faced open sea, no companion ships to follow, no landmarks visible, only his hard-fought knowledge of this ill-tempered expanse of water.

Diego sat in silence. The man — if he could in truth be named one — had lapsed into stillness till he seemed a stone carving of himself on some country church door, the hawk's profile turned to the sea. Drake averted

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his gaze and saw the guest, making his way back from the bow where he had stood as the hours passed since they left the Flemish coast behind.

"You are surefooted as any Devon Sea Dog," Drake commented.

The man's lips curled up. "Spent a little time on the water as a boy."

There was an air of watchful ease about him that Drake found commendable. A good man to have beside one in the fight. What mighty struggle lay ahead of this stranger that Death had caused his rescue?

"I trust not this sky nor this water," Drake said. "The Narrow Sea is surely the most perfidious on this round globe."

"I'd keep that accolade for the Irish Channel," the man said. "Evil-tempered stretch!"

"You know Ireland?"

"Born there. Ulster."

"I served at her majesty's pleasure in Ulster in my youth — a *very* long time ago!"

The man gazed steadily at him as if he tried to read what lay behind the face of the small boat's skipper. Then he shook his head but kept his own counsel.

The Sun had passed its meridian when, behind them, Drake saw one lone ship, headed, as they were, for the English coast. He was glad for confirmation of his course, though he had not doubted it.

"Mine ahead!" Diego called suddenly.

Diego pointed to a round black ball studded with knobs bobbing in the water. Drake pulled the tiller over hard so the little boat shuddered and the mainsail flapped, losing the wind and slowing. "What is it?"

"An invitation to die," the stranger said dryly. "There'll be more before we see Dover."

Drake fought the strong current that ran here, and they slipped cautiously past the death trap. From then on, his gaze swept the water ahead as well as the sky above for dangers he could not understand but trusted were there. Something pulsed through him as if his blood had been heated with the best canary the queen had ever served — though he had never been a man to drink to excess. Danger was a fine wine to bring a man to a fighting mood. He reveled in it.

Another of Death's traps revealed itself in the agitated waters. He

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steered the *Mary* cautiously past, his breath catching in his chest as he did so as if he were alive and had anything to lose. The man he had rescued, he reminded himself, had a life to lose — and England's future with him. Whatever that might be.

A sudden low rumbling explosion reached his ears. He whirled to see the ship he had noticed earlier upended and sinking fast in the churning water.

"Hard to avoid the buggers when they float so low in the water," Diego said. "But you're one man as can do it, Skipper."

"We'll have our revenge." The stranger's face was tight with anger.

Diego grinned. "Oh, yes indeed, guv!"

Drake stared from one to the other, the beginning of understanding coming to him.

Another of Death's birds swooped over their heads, and remembering the damage wrought by the one in the French harbor, he feared time's hourglass had run out.

"Spitfire!" the man he had rescued shouted against the noise. "One of ours!"

"Dead I may be," Drake muttered through clenched teeth. "Yet this borrowed heart beats like a drum!"

The wind gained force and filled the *Mary*'s sails. It was a very long crossing for such a little boat, yet she flew over the waves as only the best of his ships had ever done. The wind was ever his friend.

"Too bad we can't take the shortest crossing," the stranger said. "Dover would've been in sight already."

Drake looked at him. "Think you I cannot find my way?"

The man looked steadily back. "Can you?"

In answer, Drake took up the chart Diego had given him and ripped it apart. The wind took the pieces to sail a while on the air then dropped them in the sea.

Diego laughed.

The stranger didn't flinch. "Now what?"

No one in the world understood better the art of sailing. For this he had been born, and for this he had come back again. And had he not chased the Spaniard's armada through these very waters? Surely, their secret paths were etched on his soul, every twist or cunning turn by which the

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current made fools of unwary sailors. The run of current was all he needed to know to find his way across a watery wilderness.

At last in the gathering dusk of evening, he sighted a light blinking at the northern edge of the Goodwin Sands just off the coast at Margate, where he remembered many an unwary sailor — Spaniard and Englishman both — had gone aground.

"The North Goodwin Lightship," the stranger said. "Good sailing, Skipper!"

Drake nodded but did not reply. How many brave souls had this marvelous lightship kept from falling untimely into Death's hands? Yet Death always took them in the end. He turned the *Mary* a last time to head south between the dangerous sands and the coast as full dark crept over the water.

Then something — a breath of wind from a new direction — a spatter of rain light as a feather's touch — gave warning. "Reef the mainsail!"

Diego went to the mast and hurriedly followed Drake's order.

The sudden squall hit with a wet slap to his face and the *Mary* heeled over recklessly. It was all he could do to hold on to the tiller. The wind confused the seas till they ran in all directions at once, and he could not save the bow from slamming into the crest of a wave. The man he had rescued clung to the gunwale, still holding the mainsheet in one hand. Diego clutched hold of the mast against being washed overboard, though why Death must needs take measures to avoid death he did not know.

Drake corrected the angle of approach and the little *Mary* slid over the next one, regaining her course as the wave passed harmlessly beneath. He opened all his sea sense to the wind's direction. If he could not stay hard on the wind, the hungry sea would sweep them right onto the sandbar.

The *Mary* was heeling hard, waves rushing in over her low side, threatening to capsize her. All three braced themselves on the high side of the cockpit. A heavy rain pelted down, drenching them. Exhilaration flooded through his veins.

"Hold fast!" he told his crew. "We shall make port yet."

Every seventh wave was the one to knock a boat down, but he would not let waves defeat him this close to safe harbor. In the midst of his struggle with weather, he glanced at the stranger. The man had the jib sheet firmly in hand, his mouth set in a tight line.

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"Doubt you yet that the Narrow Sea is the more treacherous?" Drake shouted.

The man shook his head, but his mouth relaxed into a smile.

Wind and water battered them heavier than before, and Drake fought to keep control, the knuckles of his borrowed hands white with strain. Yet he found this body knew to keep its balance on a tossing deck, and he silently thanked the mariner whose name he did not know, commending his soul to the Lord.

Then as swiftly as it had come upon them, the squall departed. The *Mary* settled and resumed her gentle progress and Drake felt the hard drumming in his heart soften and fade. He stretched his neck, releasing tension, and caught the look of cunning that passed across Diego's dark face. Diego showed no sign of strain or tiredness.

Drake nodded toward the mast, and Diego went forward to release the reef and raise the sail to its full height.

Soon, the lightship at the southern edge of the Goodwin Sands blinked out of the darkness. The danger was past. He adjusted course to sail east-southeast, under the familiar white cliffs of the Kentish coast, luminous in starlight. The harbor slowly came in sight.

"Home," the man said, flexing stiff fingers. "And the chance to fight again."

"Right, guv," Diego said cheerfully. "Go get the buggers!"

Drake watched the looming walls of the port of Dover, far larger and busier than he remembered it. His mind raced. The task he had come back to do was completed — though he had no idea what indeed it was that he had done. He did not understand the conflict England was engaged in, or the enemy, or why this man's life was important. But war, it seemed, had not changed much since his day. Good men still lost their lives, and trickery still prevailed too often. Death sailed forever with those who risked all for their country's sake, and he cared naught for right or wrong, only for the harvest of souls.

Toward midnight, the boat bumped against the dock; the harbor was almost dark, what lanterns there were seemed shaded to cut even that meager light.

"I have seen country inns better lit!" he said.

"Don't want to guide the Hun to bomb the place, Skipper," Diego said.

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Diego jumped out and prepared to secure the dock line. Drake watched, empty at the last. Death, the gentleman, had kept his word, bringing him back when England needed him. Yet now the day was over and his own voyage, becalmed on the *Defiance* in Caribbean waters, must be completed. Soon his soul must unfurl its sails to the wind. God willing, this day had righted the balance of the scales that weighed his life.

"So good a day," he said.

Diego's eyes were fixed on the man they had rescued. Drake weighed the intensity of that gaze and knew a sudden kinship with Death's next soldier. He saw as though on the stage of a London playhouse, the alarms and retreats of the battles this man would face, and the carnage Death would reap in his wake.

"Good enough for a start, yes," the man said.

Drake sighed. "There must be a beginning of any great matter — "

"But it's the continuing to the end until it's thoroughly finished that yields the true glory," the stranger finished for him.

He stared at the man who somehow knew words he had spoken in another place and so long ago.

"I'm in your debt, sir." The stranger stood on the quay, his hand held out to Drake.

Drake took the hand. "I fear the bargain may not prove worth the price."

"I know who you are," the man said quietly. "I've heard the legends. I just never thought...."

"That you might become one?"

"Ready to go, guv?" Diego said. "I'll just tag along — Digger's the name. You look like you could use a batman."

"God go with you, whoever you are," Drake said. "You will need His mercies."

"The name's Montgomery, Sir Francis. Bernard Montgomery."

Montgomery's hand slipped through Drake's grasp like water.

Drake turned to the man he had known on so many perilous voyages.

"I always keep my word," Death said.

The wind rose, commanding him away.

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Jaye Lawrence is a corporate Website manager by day, a fiction writer by night, a college student on weekends, and a wife and mother round the clock. She expects to finish a novel as soon as she breaks a nasty habit called sleep. ("Nancy Kress's Beggars in Spain *was a terrific read but a rotten how-to manual," she complains.) In the meantime, she writes short stories. "Kissing Frogs" is her first published work of fiction. Unlike its heroine, Jaye has never dated outside her own species.*

Kissing Frogs

By Jaye Lawrence

Single Green Frog seeks his princess. Do you believe in fairy tales? One kiss and it's happily ever after. No smokers, please. PETA members preferred.

WE MET NEAR A POND, OF course.

"I loved your ad," I said after we'd finished our introductions. Sharon, meet Jerry. Frog, meet human. "But I have to admit I wasn't expecting an actual amphibian."

My companion shrugged what would have been his shoulders, if only he'd had some. The result was a rippling quiver of the skin just behind his sleek green head. Jerry was an attractive frog, really. Striking. He had iridescent green skin dappled with bronze, and a splendid crimson vocal sac below his broad froggy smile. Behind each golden eye was a perfectly round black spot, which I took to be purely decorative until a hazy memory surfaced from junior high. We'd dissected frogs in eighth

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grade biology. *Tympanums*, I thought. *My date has tympanums.*

"I wasn't expecting a genuine PETA member either," Jerry said. "That was just a bit of frog humor." He didn't croak. His voice was a smooth and pleasant baritone, surprisingly low for a creature the size of my fist, and his diction was perfect. The red vocal sac swelled to impressive proportions as he spoke.

I looked down at the Starbucks cups between us on the picnic table. I'd brought two vanilla lattes to our rendezvous, gambling that my date would be a coffee drinker. He wasn't. "I'm not a member anymore," I confessed. "I stopped contributing after they asked the town of Hamburg, Pennsylvania, to change its name to Veggieburg."

"You're joking."

"No, it's true. Years back they asked a town called Fishkill to change its name to Fishsave, but that didn't get as much publicity." I shut up and sipped my coffee, embarrassed by my own babbling. It strikes me like that on first dates sometimes, even with my own species. Glib to gibbering in two seconds flat.

After a moment's awkward silence I forced myself to meet Jerry's shining eyes again. They were bulging, but kind. He smiled. I smiled back. "So how did it happen? If you don't mind me asking."

He waved a forefoot in a dismissive gesture. His front feet had four toes each, while the heavily webbed hind feet had five. "I find it unnatural if someone doesn't. It suggests either an excess of politeness or an appalling lack of curiosity, wouldn't you say?"

He hopped a few lengths away from me along the tabletop, pausing to stare out across the water. Following his gaze, I noticed the lily pads for the first time: a flotilla of round emerald leaves, a scattered few captained by luminous white flowers. I wondered how they looked through Jerry's jewel-like eyes. A promised land? A prison?

"I was married, once upon a time," he said in his fine, fluid voice. Like a child I closed my eyes to listen. "To a rich man's daughter. When we met she had everything and I had nothing, and that attracted us both madly. We were polar opposites."

"Like magnets," I murmured.

"Magnets in love?" He sounded amused. "But you know what happens to magnets when the polarity of one is reversed."

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In place of attraction, repulsion. Yes, I knew.

"She loved me. I do believe that. But she'd never lacked for anything in her life, and she wanted all the luxuries she was accustomed to—things I couldn't afford to give her on a middle manager's salary. So she'd take them as gifts from her father, against my wishes, or run up our credit cards impossibly high, and then we'd argue. Bitter fights half the night sometimes. We didn't leave any marks, but we didn't take any prisoners either.

"With every argument I felt smaller in her eyes, less of a man. And with every shiny, expensive thing she wanted that I couldn't give her, I felt her drawing farther away. At the end she would physically recoil from me in bed at night, as though she'd touched something horrible and slimy."

I opened my eyes. "She left you because you became a frog?"

"Oh no," he said with surprise. "I became a frog because she left me."

Now there's a self-esteem problem, I thought. But it happens to us all, doesn't it? Whether you're a beauty or a beast, when someone you love rejects you, your mirror turns mean. You stand in front of it crying, "Mirror, mirror, what's wrong with me? Why wasn't I good enough for him to love?" And the damn mirror shows you. Suddenly every line and flaw is magnified; suddenly every year shows. Those extra ten pounds, that too-prominent Adam's apple, the ass too flat, the boobs too small—the cold glass reflects it all. Jerry probably started out as a nice presentable guy with eyes that bulged just a little, before his wife and his self-confidence disappeared through the looking glass.

"But at least you're getting out there now," I said finally, in what I hoped Jerry would consider an encouraging tone. To my own ears it sounded appallingly like my mother's voice, trying to cheer me up after my disastrous senior prom. "Dating. Trying to get back to normal."

Jerry's green head bobbed in a nod. "Trying, yes," he said. "But not succeeding very well so far. It's difficult enough for normal, attractive people to find love these days, Sharon, never mind a guy who's...well, not exactly Prince Charming."

I snorted. "Nobody is Prince Charming, Jerry. Prince Charming doesn't exist, and ugly stepsisters need love too. Are you sure you don't want some of this latte?"

"No, you go ahead and have it. Caffeine makes me jumpy." He winked one golden eye.

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Laughing, I toasted him with the Starbucks cup. "You don't know what you're missing. I've got to have my coffee every day or I'm absolutely Grimm."

Jerry groaned — and that *did* come out as a croak, a silly wavering croak that broke in the middle like a pubescent boy's. We both succumbed to a fit of the giggles then, human laughter mingling with bursts of frog song. The first shared laugh with someone new is always a shining moment, an instant of connection that warms you inside even if you're not wildly attracted to your date. Sometimes I get from a first date to a second on laughs alone. That's not such a bad thing, either; it beats the hell out of getting there on desperation. I've done that too, I'm sorry to say.

"That's better!" I said. "You've got to keep laughing in this world, Jerry. That's why your ad caught my eye: it was funny and optimistic."

He hopped closer and looked up intently into my eyes. His pupils weren't vertical or horizontal like most frogs' eyes, they were round like a person's. It gave him a wide-eyed, earnest look. "Is that what made you answer it?"

"I suppose so. It certainly wasn't because I believe in fairy tales." A rueful smile turned up the corners of my mouth: "Not the ones with happy endings, anyway. But I was impressed that a guy who described himself as a 'frog' still had the confidence to hope for a happily-ever-after. It sounded a little naive, maybe, but sweet. And I figured a sweet guy who didn't consider himself a handsome prince might overlook me not being much of a princess."

Jerry's vocal sac swelled and deflated, swelled and deflated. I took this to be the froggy equivalent of being at a loss for words.

"It's okay, Jerry," I said. "I know I'm no beauty." It was the truth. When I work at it, as I'd worked at it that day, I clean up well. I'm tall and slender; my hair is a glossy natural auburn; I've been told I have a lovely smile. But no amount of expensive tailoring or makeup can disguise the fact that my shoulders are too broad, my cheekbones too flat, my jaw square, my nose long. I'm a handsome woman when I try, but it would take more than plastic surgery to make me a beautiful one.

Jerry's eyes distended; he looked alarmed. "Sharon, don't say that. For pity's sake, I'm a *frog* — you can't believe I'm sitting here making judgments about your appearance! I'm grateful, so deeply grateful, that

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you're still here speaking with me at all. You're — you're the most beautiful woman I've dated in seven months!"

My eyebrows raised. "Jerry."

The red balloon of his vocal sac emptied in a sigh. "All right, I confess you're also the only one. But believe me when I tell you that you look lovely to me. Certainly much more attractive than I must look to you."

I felt my cheeks grow pink. "Uh, well, you're very — "

"Sharon."

It was my turn to sigh. "Okay. As a frog you're drop-dead gorgeous, hon, but as a guy you just aren't my type."

I ached for him as the words registered. His whole body seemed to shrink with disappointment. He looked so small and miserable, so crushed.

The strange thing about not fitting the world's narrow definition of beauty is that you never quite accept it inside. No matter how squarely you face facts in front of your own bathroom mirror, no matter how hard you struggle to make peace with yourself and live happily inside your own skin, it still hurts like hell to see your homeliness reflected in another person's eyes. Why? God only knows. It's just how we're made. We can't tickle ourselves, and we can't deal our own egos a mortal blow. Not like another person can.

At least we can pleasure ourselves. There'd be a lot more suicides in lonely apartments if we couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Jerry," I said softly. Leaning closer to him, I was stricken to see his eyes welling up with tears. "Oh, Jerry! Don't — please, it's not worth it, *please* don't — "

His mouth opened, but not to speak: to sing. Not in laughter this time, but in pain.

The sound was larger than Jerry, larger than both of us. Its mournfulness echoed across the park, its longing rippled across the water. My ears were filled with it. My bones ached with it. Each note reverberated with all the misery his small green body had borne for months, the loneliness and loss flowing from his lipless mouth in a wordless, universal song of sorrow. Wordless, yet it spoke.

I am a stranger alone in a strange land, his song said to me. *I am a beautiful creature trapped behind other eyes. I love but am not allowed*

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to love, I long for all I cannot have, I lust with loins that never cool, I love! I love! I love!

It was his song, but it could have been mine. By the time he sang the final notes, tears were streaming down my face. When the final echoes faded, I picked Jerry up in trembling hands and brought his mouth to mine.

Hands still shaking, I set him gently down again.

He was unchanged.

I put my head down on the picnic table and sobbed as though my heart were breaking. It was.

"Sharon." Jerry's cool, moist head nudged my bare arm. "Shhh, Sharon, it's all right. Please don't cry anymore."

My breath came in ragged gasps. "My name isn't Sharon, it's Stephen."

"Oh." There was a moment's silence. "Stephen, then. Please don't cry, Stephen. You did a marvelous thing for me."

I raised my head reluctantly. I knew I had to be a mess with my nose all red and runny, eyes swollen, foundation streaked. More than that, I felt exhausted emotionally and physically, aching from my head to my size eleven Prada pumps.

"You're still a frog, Jerry," I said miserably. "I didn't do a thing except hurt you. I'm so sorry."

But Jerry didn't look hurt. His golden eyes were alight with a new glow, and when he spoke his voice was jubilant. "You kissed me! Even though I'm a slimy amphibian, Sharon — Stephen — you kissed me!"

I sniffed and dabbed at my face with a Starbucks napkin. "So what? Two minutes more of that song and I probably would've slept with you too, for all the good it would do. *You're still a frog, Jerry.* I'm not your princess. I'm nobody's princess. I'm just a freak in women's clothing, dreaming of the day he gets his willy lopped off."

Jerry winced a little at that, but not as much as a man would have. Frogs don't have penises. "If you're a freak," he said gently, "then what am I? Stephen, you gave me the first ray of hope I've had in seven months. You kissed me. You weren't the right one to transform me — you said it yourself, I'm not your type — but you did kiss me. That means it's not hopeless after all. I'm not so repulsive that no one will ever touch me again.

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"Don't you understand? I've been terrified that even if I did meet the right woman, my princess, she would only run from me. But you didn't run from me, you kissed me!"

I shook my head in disbelief. "Jerry, I'm glad I made your day. But if your idea of a successful relationship is your date not running away screaming — " I stopped as my own words registered. "Hmm. Come to think of it, that's my idea of a good date too."

For the second time that afternoon we laughed together, but I was still weighed down with the sorrow of his song. My head was aching, and my Wonderbra was digging sharply into my chest in a way that felt anything but wonderful. All I wanted was to go home, put on pajamas, and drown my sorrows in a pint of Cherry Garcia. I gathered up the Starbucks litter and took it to a nearby trash barrel, then returned to the picnic table to make my farewells to Jerry.

He was still beaming from tympanum to tympanum. "It's been a pleasure, Sharon."

I picked up my handbag from the bench seat. "You don't have to call me Sharon anymore. But thank you."

"You *are* Sharon," he replied, "and you are beautiful. I'll never forget you."

I smiled wryly. "I have to say you're going to stick in my mind for a while too, hon. Thank you for a very...memorable date." I bent down and gave him one more for the road, right on top of his dappled green head. "You take care now. I hope you find your princess."

"And you your prince, sweet Sharon."

Still haunted by his beautiful, terrible song, I was all the way home and halfway naked before I discovered why my padded bra had suddenly gotten so uncomfortable.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall. I had breasts.

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Melanie Fazi is a young writer described by one French editor as "the hottest new writer on the scene." Her first story for us is a moody tour of the canals of Venice. The original version of this story appeared in Emblèmes no. 5: Venise Noire, *edited by Lea Silhol and published by Editions de l'Oxymore in 2002.*

The Masked City

By Melanie Fazi
Translated by Brian Stableford

THE MASKED CITY NEVER sleeps. Her insomnias are contagious. For six months I've haunted her streets. Hundreds cross my path every day, forgetting me immediately. With my shoulderbag on my back and my commonplace clothes, I'm taken for a tourist or a student. They don't see me, but there are others on watch. Sometimes, on the canal banks, I could swear that I hear the splashing waves calling me by name.

Giordano Salvaggio, the waters murmur. *We have not forgotten, Giordano.*

I'm a poacher of a rather special kind, and Venice is my hunting ground. Six months is quite enough to secure a more-than-intimate rapport with a city. It's sometimes sufficient merely to exchange a glance: draw out a single thread and the entire tapestry unravels between your fingers. But a city stripped naked is never beautiful to behold.

Sofia didn't have the time to understand. Sometimes I envy her that.

They make me laugh with their *city of splendor*. How long does it take to perceive the filth encrusted beneath the gilt and varnish of myth?

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It's the legend they come to admire, not the city. Scarcely time to fill a few rolls of film, to acquire a stock of anecdotes to recount at a later date, far away from here, with a nostalgic gleam in the eye. Once home again, the sickness induced by the sight of those polluted canals is forgotten — along with the walls, almost close enough to touch, that seem to be weighing one another up. Photographs have the virtue of effacing such things.

But for six months I've lived with the dizziness of these arches and bridges, these towers and staircases, these yawning windows. I know her days, choked by desiccation, dust, and burning sunlight, and her ever-tranquil nights, and — above all else — her canals: open wounds in a compact mass held together by the thick sutures of the bridges. They're my normality.

The canals of Venice — what a magnificent farce! They're filthy, those waters: troubled and dirty. It's a veritable syrup that flows through the city's arteries. Do they ever ask themselves, all these visitors, how many corpses these waters have transported? Because they've inevitably done so, being such a convenient hiding place. A glacial coldness must hold sway at the very bottom, where the sunlight can't reach. More than one corpse must have finished up there without anyone knowing. I know of at least one that the waters have carried away.

I no longer dare examine those waters too closely, and haven't for some time. The distorting mirror of the Venetian canals confuses perspectives at its leisure. The medley of changing reflections no longer has anything in common with the outlines of the bridges and the facades — not to mention the faces that might conceive the absurd idea of admiring themselves therein. The waters amuse themselves by corrupting every image, doubtless to remind us that the entire city is nothing but a gigantic illusion. Not without reason is Venice called the city of masks: a courtesan decked out in silks and ribbons, but already corroded by the pox. She rots within, without ever giving up her brilliant smile.

I'm not from here — and if there is one thing of which I'll remain proud until the last, it's that.

There are people like me that she fears, parasites of my species. The tourists she has always tolerated, doubtless amusing herself as much with their idiotic devotion as with their blindness. It is to them, after all, that she owes her legendary status, and a divinity would be nothing without a

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company of faithful followers. Venice has her labyrinthine sid-streets, her clouds of pigeons and her flow of tourists; such is the natural order of things.

Near to the Piazza San Marco, I've often come across a street urchin busy ripping off the tourists. Luca is ten years old, full of energy, with an innate gift for salesmanship — a mere fledgling in form, his shoulders lightly sunburnt. His uniform hardly varies from one day to the next: a tank top, sandals, and Bermuda shorts; a gold bracelet advertising his forename; a Santa Rita medal about his neck; and the ancient scuffed satchel in which he carries his merchandise.

Ricordi di Venezia! he cries, at the top of his voice.

He knows how to home in on the tourists and accost them at exactly the right moment, just as they're posing for a souvenir photograph or feeding breadcrumbs to the pigeons. They're recognizable by the particular expression with which they gaze at things, tinged with curiosity but already hollow. Luca knows how to overwhelm their attention with a deluge of words, until their wallets open by themselves, under the spell of some magic formula known only to himself. He accompanies his patter with the smile of a brave *ragazzino*, which he must have been practicing since he was a little child.

I had less innocent means of ripping off the tourists, but it was to sell them shoddy goods of a less ordinary kind. His merchandise is plunder reaped at hazard from souvenir shops — wishywashy postcards, flags in the city's colors, brightly colored imitation cameras whose viewfinders reveal a series of Venetian clichés — together with a harvest of homemade bracelets whose materials couldn't have cost a tenth of the price he exacts for them.

Luca has nothing to fear; he's a native. I was similar in kind once, but I came from somewhere else. To live on the credulity of others isn't in itself such a great crime, but among the things that one learns to one's cost is an essential rule: Never offend Venice.

Was Sofia the less culpable of the two of us, seeing that she was spared that lesson?

We were living in a minuscule room at the top of a narrow staircase, whose only window let in soupy air that was just about breathable: a confined space in which two bodies could only coexist in a condition of

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intimacy. It was there that we'd make plans for the future, which became ever more vague. We'd stay for six months, a year at most — just time enough to exhaust the vein before moving on toward an indefinable *elsewhere.* There had been other cities; further ones awaited us.

Sofia rarely went out — only when it was necessary, when her materials ran out. Sitting cross-legged on the mattress that was our only furniture, she wove our traps as patiently as a spider.

She laughed when I gave her that nickname: *ragno mio,* my spider. In our private code, I was her hunter, *Giordano il Cacciatore.*

She also had a spider's agility. They were beautiful, her traps. At one time I had thought of selling them in the market, passing them off as pieces of tribal art. I would have got a good price for them. Sofia had an artist's love for work well done, and very slender fingers, well-adapted for minutely detailed tasks. They would busy themselves fixing a lattice of colored threads to the frame, sometimes mixed with a few brown hairs — a way of signing her work, perhaps? I never saw two of those traps that were alike.

She had elected to model her works on Native American dream-catchers, but I'd never known whether the pearls, pebbles, and pigeon feathers that she integrated into her structures were mere ornaments or necessary ingredients.

It was the same with the hairs, as stout as those of a mare's mane, which Sofia wore permanently braided into a thick plait draped over her shoulder. I sometimes found them in the four corners of the room, abandoned there as if they were carefully marking out her territory. The room belonged to her; my own terrain was the streets of the *città.*

The game amused her less than the time she passed adorning her traps, like a child painstakingly constructing collages. As for the money I brought back at the conclusion of my hunts, for Sofia the Spider it was only a means, not an end. She welcomed it gladly, insofar as it permitted her to weave more traps and prepare for our future departure.

I too had chosen my art, and she did her best to help me with it. It was I who knew how to hide the traps under cover of wandering hands, and it was I who harvested our prizes at nightfall. It was also I who lulled the suspicions of our prey.

We complemented one another perfectly.

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One evening, I returned to find that bare-walled room empty. I waited, sitting on the mattress that suddenly seemed too large, staring idiotically at her unfinished traps.

Her too-conspicuous absence filled the whole room, and the phantom of her brown skin gave me pins and needles in my fingertips; they had lost the habit of embracing emptiness.

Sofia never came back — and without her, the hunt for sighs lost its savor.

Eventually, I resolved to go out in search of her. I looked for her in the blinding whiteness of the days and the muffled murmur of the nights, windows pitting the walls like shell craters. I walked at hazard along side streets so narrow that one passes through them as if they were canyons, crushed by the immensity.

Venice has many faults in her reality; she quickly acquires the appearance of a Hall of Mirrors for those who take no heed of their route. She knows how to shuffle the lost traveler's cards, playfully or maliciously.

I was careful not to look into the watery depths, for fear of stirring up disturbing ideas by association. As long as a disappearance remains a mere absence, one can retain the right to hope. But as I passed the small boats posed like nightwatchmen on the banks of the canal, I wasn't sure that I wanted to know what they had seen. It was at one such station, at the very bottom of a staircase leading down to the water, that Sofia came back to me.

She surged out of the canal in a shower of mud, taking great care to sprinkle me. It was the most artful of baptisms: Venice putting her mark on my body. She was on my face and my hands, the trace of her never-dying waters. I can't be sure the day will ever come when I can get rid of her defilement. The clothes I wore that night I never wore again.

Sofia had an indecent smile upon her lips that was not her own. The skin of her face, bleached by her sojourn in the canal, was beginning to detach itself. One piece of frayed skin extended from a framework of bone where the nose jutted out like the beak of a bird mask. The discolored flesh formed a white stain upon the night, like the reflection of a new Moon in the water.

All that remained of her unraveled plait was a ragged mass of algae.

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Her sodden garments gushed with every gesture, and the once-light cotton of her dress constrained her as tightly as a courtesan's corset. The perfume of salt and spices formerly exuded by her skin was concealed beneath a thick odor of silt. When she spoke, a trickle of dirty water ran from her lips.

Buona sera, Gio!

A curious sound, like someone gargling attempting to imitate a familiar voice. Venice spoke to me, using Sofia's voice. As well as a baptism, I was offered a warning. It was not too late to redeem myself.

The night when Venice spoke to me, I saw myself in the shoes of Sisyphus at the hour of his judgment. Certain punishments are dizzying on the human scale, but what are they to a city? Little more than a game. There was a logic to it, and I couldn't see how to extricate myself therefrom. When I sealed our bargain with a word, I tried to stifle the small voice within me that howled in disgust.

I don't belong to you, Madre Venezia. You've taken Sofia, but you don't have me.

I made a pact for my salvation: a compromise, admittedly, but at least I've saved my life — for the moment. Venice claims her due, and here I am, having become her official hunter. Poacher of the Venetian Night: what a glorious ring the title has! I could do without it, thank you very much — but I have no choice.

Since that night, I prowl the flanks of the beast, hoping to have advance warning of the baring of its teeth. I carry the sounds of her nights in my shoulder bag.

March, soldier! Your route will be long and the issue uncertain.

I can't afford to make mistakes; I have so few traps left. Sofia never showed me her secrets. Even if she had, I have much less agile hands; I would never be able to weave such threads. Her traps were so beautiful, and I have nothing else to keep in memory of her, but I can't keep them for myself. They're too few in number for the task that awaits me.

I lost more than one of them near the Bridge of Sighs, in the days when I was still hunting entirely for myself: deposited there in the evening, they had vanished in the morning. I had thought that it was the work of a human thief, but I'm no longer so sure. Cities sometimes play the rascal in their turn. The Bridge hasn't budged since, always making its round back to avoid touching the surface of the water. The

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arch is almost too perfect — but I'm the one who avoids it now.

I remember the expression that the tourists had when I whispered in their ears the nature of my merchandise. First a skeptical glance at my boxes, too light to contain anything that might be valuable; then they read in my face a sincerity that made them dubious. The fear of being taken for a fool caused them to hesitate — but after all, *why not*? And then, once the seed of doubt was sown, and because they *needed* to know, they parted uncomplainingly with an exorbitant sum.

I have many vices, but I'm not a liar. I would have paid dearly to be present, just once, at one of those hotel bedroom scenes, when they barricaded themselves in to verify my statements.

Nothing falls out of my metallic box — which formerly contained coffee, sweets, or biscuits — but a single pebble: a fragment of Venice, like fingernail trimmings used in some voodoo spell. (If only it were enough to kill her!)

But from this pebble, within the blink of an eye, a din erupts that suddenly fills the entire space. A noise of chains and footsteps, mingled with cries and sighs: the inescapable cadence of the march to the scaffold. Noises which speak of the gibbet and the executioner's blade, sometimes mingled with laughter and insults.

And my pigeon ought by now to be cowering in a corner of the room, hands clasped to his ears — because he does not want *that* Venice. He was promised palaces and bridges, excursions in gondolas and banquets, not phantoms and executions. He would have realized then that I had not lied in promising him *an authentic sigh captured on the Bridge:* my own version of the sound of the sea in a shell.

Each to his own kind of rip-off.

But I had never troubled myself with what became of my sighs once they had escaped from their box. They must have flown through the first open window and dispersed themselves in the air, but what then? Did they return to enshrine themselves in the Bridge, or did they lose themselves in the Venetian night?

One always asks oneself those questions too late. Lack of common sense or smug optimism — I plead guilty on both counts.

She has made me pay, the trollop. And ever since, she watches me with windows that are so many unsleeping eyes.

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The terms of the deal are simple: Render to the Bridge one sigh for every one that I have stolen. The *lex talionis* of cities is no less refined than that of humans — for the punishment is not so much the task to be accomplished as the corruption of the eyesight. And I have orders not to quit her walls in search of new prizes.

One learns quickly how to develop one's senses when one hunts for shadows and sighs. To see immediately behind appearances, and hear the secret sounds — for every setting, however sumptuous it might be, hides a darker side. Learn to hear the stones breathe, if it is necessary to do the job. Hear the pulse of the thick blood that nourishes the mineral dreams of the city. Sense — in every stone, in every wall — the reminiscence of a rarely peaceful past, the phantom of days of splendor and violence.

Her days are drawn out in restless activity, her nights are a carnival of shadows. At the emptiest hours, when the occasion arises, Venice pulsates to the rhythm of the splashing waves, which is less than a presence but more than a murmur, always cowering in the folds of silence.

Sometimes I think I hear the waters whispering my name, stirring the shadows as if the blackness were brooding.

Now that I know Venice without her makeup, I can see and foresee the things that have been. Henceforth I am not so much a body as the prolongation of a gaze. That is what she wishes me to be.

I watch out for traces at the street corners, and in the shadows of the bridges, always quick to draw out my traps.

Here, a joyful party has turned sour. Alcoholic vapors are mingled with the contours of the night, and at first light the lifeless body of a courtesan has been discovered. Somewhere nearby, the guests have consigned her cumbersome remains to the discretion of the waters.

It is there that I shall capture the first sigh to satisfy the city.

Down there, a little farther away, that bridge has borne witness to a cold-blooded murder: a traveler stabbed for his money and left there to die like a dog.

There are others there, without number: murders; executions; treasons; suicides — and I only mention those whose traces I have rediscovered. Whether they perished by the blade, by fire, by drowning or by burning, the voices of the dead are never extinguished. They're everywhere, and it's those that I track down. I play the part of a witness.

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She is there too, the mark of History; that is doubtless the lot of all great cities. Can one traverse the centuries and remain unchanged? Venice has been populated by millions of souls. She has been made the confidante of thousands of plots and intrigues. Her waters have hidden "the disappeared" for centuries; it isn't only the stones that are nourished by the past. The past is all that remains to her; how can the neverending invasion be resisted, if not by clinging on to its acquisitions?

As for me, I've become a pinball moved by a flipper, which rebounds from one wall to another without ever checking its course. I accumulate points for want of the power to escape the machine. I hope to remain a long time apart from the hole that will signify the end of the party. I'm not yet ready to lay down my arms.

But perhaps I already have a little of that heavy water mixed in my blood. How can this permanent cough be explained, except as the aftertaste of drowning? I choke already in my dreams. If I delay too long, my corpse will probably be found one night at the back of an alleyway, its lungs full of turbid water.

One thing is certain, in any case: it's not at the bottom of a canal that my course will terminate. Venice won't give me the satisfaction of letting me be reunited with Sofia.

At the least, I shall be cast as a stone myself, to take my place in a wall in my own turn. My skin is already dried up. My face is no more than a nest of itches and the tips of my fingers are beginning to crumble. If I don't make haste to gain some respite by capturing another prize, I'll soon lose the use of my hands. Venice would doubtless prefer that fate — slow and refined at the same time. She could then absorb me into herself, as she must have digested so many others. I can no longer pass by a statue in this city without asking myself whether it was formerly something else, and for what crime it has been punished.

"My body in Venezia, a stone among the stones?"

Sooner die a thousand times. I shall hunt until the end, and she can't count on me to surrender.

The watchful city doesn't forget — but which of the two of us shall have the last word?

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John Morressy mentions good news and not so good news about Kedrigern. Good: a new collection of stories about the wizard has just been published. Not so good: it's being published in Czech. (Okay, it's good news for all our Czech readers, but the rest of us must bide our time.)

Mr. Morressy's unusual new story is quite a departure from his fantasy stories. In fact, it's a departure from most anything we've seen before around here...

The Long Run

By John Morressy

I.

AT THE FIRST PARTING, A narrow trail led off to the right, then turned and gradually bore upward into the trees. The main road continued across the plain to the ragged silhouette of the far mountains.

For Annalter and two of his companions, this was the place appointed for departure from their starting group. Nine of them had been running together since the start of the race three days ago. They separated without a break in stride, each runner raising a hand in a silent gesture of farewell returned by the others. No words were wasted. Even though it was all but certain that the runners would never meet again, no one showed any emotion. They were encouraged: the race had gone well thus far. Nonetheless, they felt a heightening anticipation of the moment when each of them would at last enter on the solitary track that he or she was to follow to the end.

A short way into the forest, the first of Annalter's companions broke

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away. Her path led off at a sharp angle, and she was gone from sight in moments. Annalter and the other man ran on, alternating in the lead where the trail narrowed, running abreast where the width of the way permitted. Near sundown they came to the shelter, a simple lean-to with a bench for sleeping. A cabinet held their day's supplies.

They slept soundly, undisturbed, and were on their way again at first light, running at a steady pace through early mist sweet with the forest's fragrance chill and bracing against their foreheads. At midday the trail divided. They parted in silence, the only sound their regular breathing and the rhythmic padding of their footfalls, reduced now to the sound of a solitary runner. Annalter was alone at last. For him, the race had begun in earnest.

Soon the track shrank to no more than a narrow lane, winding and twisting between walls of stone sometimes so close together that he scraped his elbows several times before he was able to adjust his movements to the straitness of the passage. The ground was even, and the grade so gentle that he was scarcely aware of it. He knew that he was high in the hills by this time, but despite the height and the rising road, his breathing was regular and he felt no strain.

The shelters in the hills were simple. Some were crude enclosures of stone with planked roofs, barely large enough to house one person. Twice he found his supplies cached in a natural alcove in the rocks, and had to make a bed for himself out of leaves and grass. But Annalter cared little how austere his resting place for the night might be. A runner was inured to discomfort. He knew that at the end of every day's run a shelter would be waiting, and a stock of food. This was all he had a right to expect.

For days he saw no one and no human habitation. He saw nothing at all by day but the walls on either side, the sky overhead, and the path underfoot; at night, a shelter. At last he left the walls behind and emerged onto a high plateau. The world seemed to fling itself open to him, and for much of the day he ran on a green plain beneath a cloudless sky. When he began to descend, he saw from the hillside trail distant mountains, a river, and here and there in the valleys the smoke rising from chimneys. The next day, at dusk, he came to the first station.

It was a small but solid structure divided into two sections. The larger section held the quarters of the attendants, the supplies, cooking and

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medical facilities, and the communications system. The other section, for use by the runner only, was a cubicle containing a single cot and a small washroom.

Annalter bathed, ate a light meal, and settled down to a long rest. Next morning he received a thorough examination. When he sat down to breakfast afterward, he asked the cook for news of his starting group and learned that he was the seventh of their original number to reach a station. No word of the other groups had yet been received; but the race had scarcely begun. It was not yet time for concern. The best news was that two of his starting group had already encountered the first obstacle in their way and had successfully passed through uninjured and able to continue without delay.

The news encouraged him. Paradoxically, now that he was alone, a full participant in the race, he felt closer in spirit to the others who were making their solitary ways, as he was, to the goal. He shared their fears and dangers, and wished them success and a safe run. They were not competitors against one another, but rather partners in competition against the race itself. Each alone, and all collectively, ran against time and exhaustion, human frailty, and all the attendant perils of the race.

II.

They were no ordinary runners, and this race was like none that had been run before. It was unlikely that such a race would be run again in the lifetime of these runners; perhaps there would never be another. They had been selected with the greatest care. Stringent standards of performance, character, and intelligence had been applied, and the physical testing had been carried out under the strictest discipline.

Starting position had been determined by lot. It was Annalter's good fortune to be placed in the very last rank of starters, and thus be a witness to all the splendor and ceremony of the opening days.

Stands had been erected along both sides of the track. They swept upward in a graceful arc that lifted those in the rearmost tiers high above the ground and made them and the runners below them appear to one another as tiny figures. Not a single empty place could be seen in the stands. A constant drone of voices flowed down from the spectators,

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sometimes making it difficult for the officials to instruct the runners or confer among themselves in normal speaking voices.

Lowest of all, and consequently closest to the track and the runners, was the reviewing stand. It extended farther forward than the stands behind it and on either side, and was filled with dignitaries seated on cushioned chairs under a colorful canopy and attended by servants. Flags, pennants, and banners flew overhead. All around, at rigid attention, stood a guard of honor. The scene comprised a magnificent pageant: brilliant yet dignified; splendid but not ostentatious; triumphant without arrogance; unforgettable to any who witnessed it, an inspiration to the runners and all who watched them with pride and envy.

Speech followed speech in those early days. Some speeches recalled memorable and stirring events from history and legend, others paid tribute to the leaders who had conceived and organized this race. Many speakers led the crowd in prayers for the safety and survival of the runners in the trial to come.

At the end of every speech a prolonged cheer arose from the common stands, and all during the speeches, a steady eager droning of voices continued, muted in moments of solemnity but never completely stilled. The level of excitement was too high for even the most disciplined to maintain silence. In the intervals between speeches, musicians paraded past the reviewing stand and the ranks of assembled runners. Dancers, acrobats, and entertainers diverted the crowd with their talents. Every evening at nightfall during these days of anticipation the crowd was treated to an elaborate display of fireworks. Music, feasting, and dance continued throughout the night.

Amid the festivities, only the runners remained completely serious and single-minded. Their thoughts were not on the present gaiety; they were focused on what lay ahead.

The day came when the last speech was given. The bands had played their last notes, the entertainers done their last turns. Late in the afternoon the chief official of the race rose from his place in the reviewing stand. The crowd fell silent. He spoke briefly, recalling to everyone the significance of this day and moment, and then, as the Sun descended, he bid the runners assemble. The torches were ignited, twin rows extending as far as the eye could see. The first ranks marched to their places, the

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others formed orderly files behind them, and as the Sun touched the horizon he signaled for the race to begin.

The crowd exploded in a jubilant roar when the first runners sprang forward as if in pursuit of the sinking Sun and made their way down the illuminated track. The cheering continued undiminished all through that night and the next, and was only slightly less exuberant on the third and fourth nights. But there were many runners, and as night succeeded night and rank after rank set out, the cheering was no longer so loud as it had been at the start. There were now intervals of silence, and these intervals grew in duration and frequency as night succeeded night.

Annalter and the others in the final ranks felt no slight. They understood. Some of the spectators had simply grown bored. Those whose favorites had started on the first or second day had already begun their journey home. Many were exhausted by the strain of prolonged excitement. Some had died.

At last Annalter and his group left the starting line. When they passed a certain section of the stands they heard cheers and shouts of encouragement, but whether they were intended for him or one of his companions Annalter could not tell. Soon they were running past empty stands dimly lit by guttering torches, and then the stands were behind them and they were in open country. Under a bright Moon, the smooth hard-packed road where the testing of the runner began opened before them.

III.

Two days after leaving the station, on a clear straight section of the trail, Annalter encountered the first obstacle. He passed through safely, and met no others on that portion of his course. At the second rest station, he learned that two members of his starting group had been lost.

He was more cautious now, more conscious of the danger that lay ahead. But he negotiated the second obstacle, and soon after that the third, with such ease, and ran without incident for so long, that he became overconfident. The fourth obstacle nearly proved to be his undoing.

It was a long time before he reached it, so long that afterward he had no clear idea or accurate memories. He had a moment of terrible awareness, fear, a sudden shock, then desperation and despair and oblivion. He

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awoke at a rest station, where he had been carried by hunters who found him lying in a ravine far from the path, his clothing torn, his body scraped and bruised as if he had been hurled or dragged a long distance. His right arm was fractured, but his legs were uninjured and the attendant assured him that he would be able to continue when his arm had healed.

Annalter had no memory of what had happened. For a time he slept poorly, troubled by nightmares, but they ceased before he was ready to run again.

IV.

Reflection over generations has given rise to many theories about the obstacles. Some philosophers hold that they existed long before the race and the runners and independent of them; that they are not in essence obstacles but seem to be so only because of limited human perception and consequent inability to grasp their true purpose; that in reality they are self-sufficient and self-justified entities to which human undertakings are irrelevant. Others consider them to be purely subjective realities incapable of existence outside the mind that perceives them, and insist that each individual creates obstacles of paramount importance to him or her but insignificant, or even nonexistent, in the lives of others. Still other theorists teach that speculation on the matter is futile; that we can have only a vague and shadowy awareness of the obstacles, for they are of such subtlety that all humans encounter them daily without suspecting their existence.

The number, or amount, of the obstacles has long been a matter of conjecture of a kind akin to the ongoing debate over their nature, some holding that there is and always will be, indeed can only be, one obstacle, while others believe that an infinite number exist. Though dispute on these points has on occasion been violent, and one of the legends tells of a war over the issue, the majority of the people show no concern over these questions.

Obstacles are no longer referred to by individual names, as was once the practice. It is assumed that the names were purely descriptive, although it is uncertain whether they were intended to describe the nature of the individual obstacle, its similarity to some familiar object, its appearance, its location, or some other significant fact. At some point the

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attitude toward the naming of obstacles changed and names were conferred which have no discernible meaning. Eventually all individual names were abandoned as being unnecessarily disquieting and only the collective term was applied. As a consequence, serious questions arose concerning the purpose and usefulness of language, and some went so far as to deny the possibility of communication.

V.

Near the seventh station was a town. When the townspeople learned of Annalter's approach, they organized a festival in his honor. They were kindly people, and they treated him with genuine respect and concern.

On his last night at the station, Annalter had a visitor. He was a man of advanced years who bore himself confidently. His attire, though plain and similar to that of the others in the town, was well-cut and made of the best material. He spoke softly, but his voice was strong and his tone and manner that of a man who knows his words are heeded and expects them to be obeyed.

"Forgive me for intruding," he said. "I was unable to meet you at the festival and I wished to speak to you before you go on."

Annalter offered him the single stool. The visitor seated himself beside the lamp, studying Annalter even as the runner studied him.

"You have endured much. Will you go on?" the visitor said.

"I must."

"Why?"

"I am a runner."

"And is that reason enough?"

"I began to train for this race when it was first announced. I was very young then. From that time on I cannot remember a day when the race was not the most important thing in my life. As long as I am able to go on, I will."

"But you cannot hope to win. Surely you know that."

"Victory is...." Annalter paused, frowned, and made an uncertain groping gesture. "Victory, the hope of victory, is not why we run. You say I can never win. That may be so. Perhaps no one can win, but I still must run."

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Neither one spoke for a time, then the visitor said, "You know better than I how dangerous the way can be. What lies ahead may be worse than anything you've yet experienced. Worse than you can imagine."

"I know that."

"From now on, you may be entirely alone."

Annalter shrugged. "Being alone does not frighten me. Everyone is alone."

"I have no wish to frighten you. I only want you to think of what it may be like. Eventually there will be long distances between stations, no towns or villages along the way. If you go on far enough there may be no more stations, no more help, only a terrible loneliness and an empty road with no sign of an end."

"The race is all that matters."

"Other things matter." The man leaned forward. In a gentle tone he urged Annalter, "Stay with us. We need you here."

"A runner does not abandon the race."

"Others have done so, and no one thinks the worse of them. There are many runners. You will not be missed."

"You ask me to betray myself."

The man raised his hands in a sharp gesture of denial. "We ask you to save yourself and help us. The race will go on. One of the townspeople will run in your place, if you wish it. Many are fit and willing. We will do anything within reason, only stay with us. We need someone with your qualities to lead us. Surely that is more important than the race."

"I must go on."

"You will have a house and good land. You can marry, and live a life like other men."

Annalter said nothing, only shook his head. The visitor started to speak, but checked himself and sighed. He rose and went to the door, where he paused to say, "Remember this: as long as you live, you can return to us. We will wait."

VI.

In the time that followed, Annalter thought frequently of the townsman's offer. When the way was difficult and his suffering seemed

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beyond endurance, he cursed the obstinacy that drove him on. More than once he lay down at night on the bare ground resolved to turn back the next day and return to the town. But he always went on.

One rainy morning in early spring he could go no farther. He left the road and wandered, weak and trembling, aching from head to foot, until he came to a farm. The farmer asked him no questions, even though it was obvious at a glance that Annalter was a runner. He gave him food and work clothes, and a place to sleep.

Annalter recovered and settled there. He worked hard until one night, after the harvest, when the farmer burst in upon him late, in a drunken frenzy, and fell on his knees at Annalter's feet. He broke down and wept, begged Annalter's forgiveness, called him brother. He confessed that he, too, had once been a runner, and had abandoned the race.

Later that night, when the farmer had fallen asleep, Annalter put on his runner's garb and left the house. He made his way back to the very spot where he had left the trail, and took up the race.

After that came a period of great confusion. He encountered several frightening obstacles in quick succession. He survived them all, but his memories were confused and disturbing. Ever afterward he recalled sights, sounds, and impressions that his senses and his reason told him no one could possibly have experienced. And yet he had, and he could not make himself forget.

After the last of those obstacles he ran on for a long time, how long he could not be certain, exhausted and terrified, driven by desperation, his mind disoriented, his thought incoherent, his running not the smooth measured stride he was trained to but spurts of wild headlong flight culminating in exhaustion and collapse; and then, abruptly, he was on an open road under the setting Sun, his mind calm, his pace regular. A station was visible in the distance.

He entered the station at sundown and immediately collapsed on the narrow bed. He awoke at daylight racked with hunger. When he tried to stand, he staggered from weakness and fell back on the bed. Despite his hunger he slept again, deeply. When at last he was able to rise, he was shocked by the sight of his arms and legs. They were thin and covered with pale scars from unremembered mischances. He looked in the mirror over the wash basin and saw that his hair was streaked with white, his face deeply lined.

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The station was unattended, and had long been so. He prepared food from the skimpy stores, and when he had eaten he searched the station for news of the race and the other runners. He found no messages, no sign that anyone had visited this station since the time it was erected and stocked.

At the farmer's house he had heard tales from a traveler and dismissed them as foolish rumors. Now he feared that they might be true. The traveler had talked for most of a night, sometimes asserting boldly, sometimes hinting, speaking now of things he had seen with his own eyes, and now of things overheard at third or fourth hand. He told of runners destroyed in natural catastrophes. He claimed to have met runners who had left the race and told him of others who had done so, many others, and attendants who had abandoned their stations. It was possible, he said, that all the ways were empty now, all the stations untended, that no one ran and the race was over and forgotten. He recounted grim tales of murder in remote villages where a runner was looked upon with suspicion and fear.

Alone in the empty station, Annalter had time to recall every detail of the traveler's stories. For the first time the thought came to him that for all he knew, or could know, he might be the last runner. From here on he might be more alone than a runner had ever been before.

He thought of the way ahead, with no more attendants, no helpful townspeople, no instructions, no stations, perhaps not even a shelter or a food cache; great danger, hardship and hunger and a loneliness worse than any he had yet known. He had no reason to go on. He reflected on the townsman's offer and all it could mean to him, and still could not bring himself to decide. He remained at this station until the last scrap of food was gone, and then he returned to the race.

VII.

The way became harder, but he did not turn back. He was often hungry, sometimes weak and faint from hunger, but every time he reached the point of giving up, he came upon a food cache. The food was always stale, sometimes rotten, but enough was edible for him to keep going.

The long run took its inevitable toll. Many times his feet were so swollen and bloody that he could not run, could not even bear to stand, and had to make his way to shelter on his hands and knees. But as soon as he

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recovered he went on. His sleep was uneasy and he often awoke crying out at terrifying dreams. On some nights he could not sleep, and sat by a fire listening to the howling of wolves on the way ahead. None of this deterred him. Eventually he could no longer run for more than a few minutes without pausing to rest. Even when he could barely walk, he went on.

VIII.

He came to a long straight stretch where the road was wide and the surface covered with faded markings. It appeared to have been well and carefully made, but now it was cracked in places. Grass and bushes grew in the cracks.

Rows of stands lined the way on both sides. They were old and sagging, and had collapsed in many places, but they, too, appeared to have been sturdily built. At one time they might have held thousands of spectators. Their paint was dry and peeled now, but the little that remained showed that these stands had once been bright with color.

Dust blew over the roadway and collected into little heaps around the grass that had grown in the cracks. Tattered pennants and strips of weatherworn canopies fluttered and cracked in the dry wind. Except for the flapping of torn cloth, the creak of desiccated wood and the soft moan of the wind through and around the empty structures, all was silent. His slow footsteps made no sound in the dust.

Beyond the stands, which stretched for a long way and took him days to pass, he found the road so overgrown that only with great difficulty could he distinguish it from the surrounding plain. This place troubled him, and he pressed on in the darkness that night to be away from it.

Some time later, he had no way of telling how long, he collapsed, too weak and sick to go on, and dragged himself to the side of the road in search of a place to die. A woman found him. She took him to her home, half-carrying him, and laid him gently on her bed.

She was a widow, she said, childless, living alone on a small plot. Her days were long, her work exhausting, but she found the time to nurse him slowly back to health. A season passed, and then another, and Annalter's strength came back. He felt able to return to the race, but chose instead to stay with her for a time.

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He put his uniform and runner's insignia aside and adopted the clothing of the region. His stay extended from days to months, then to years. As time passed, he sometimes had no thought of the race for months on end; only of her, their children, and the unending round of their daily duties. He began to feel differently about many things. It was good to live the life of ordinary men, to have neighbors and form friendships and share the daily events and trials of life, to eat food he had grown himself and take his meals each day under a familiar roof, at his own table, surrounded by his own family. It was good to work the soil, to wake in the morning and feel a woman at his side and know that they belonged to each other and that he was no longer alone.

He told her little of the past. She did not press him for information, nor did their neighbors, though whenever he spoke of the race they listened with interest. He told her of the offer he had had to become the head man of a prosperous town, and for several months they discussed the possibility of going there; but it was far distant and he was not certain of the way. Eventually they talked of it no more. He never spoke of such things to their children.

Four years passed, and Annalter was happy. But when their third child was still small, he slipped from the house one night. By late afternoon he had found the road. He ran slowly at first, not without pain; but by the third day his stride was sure.

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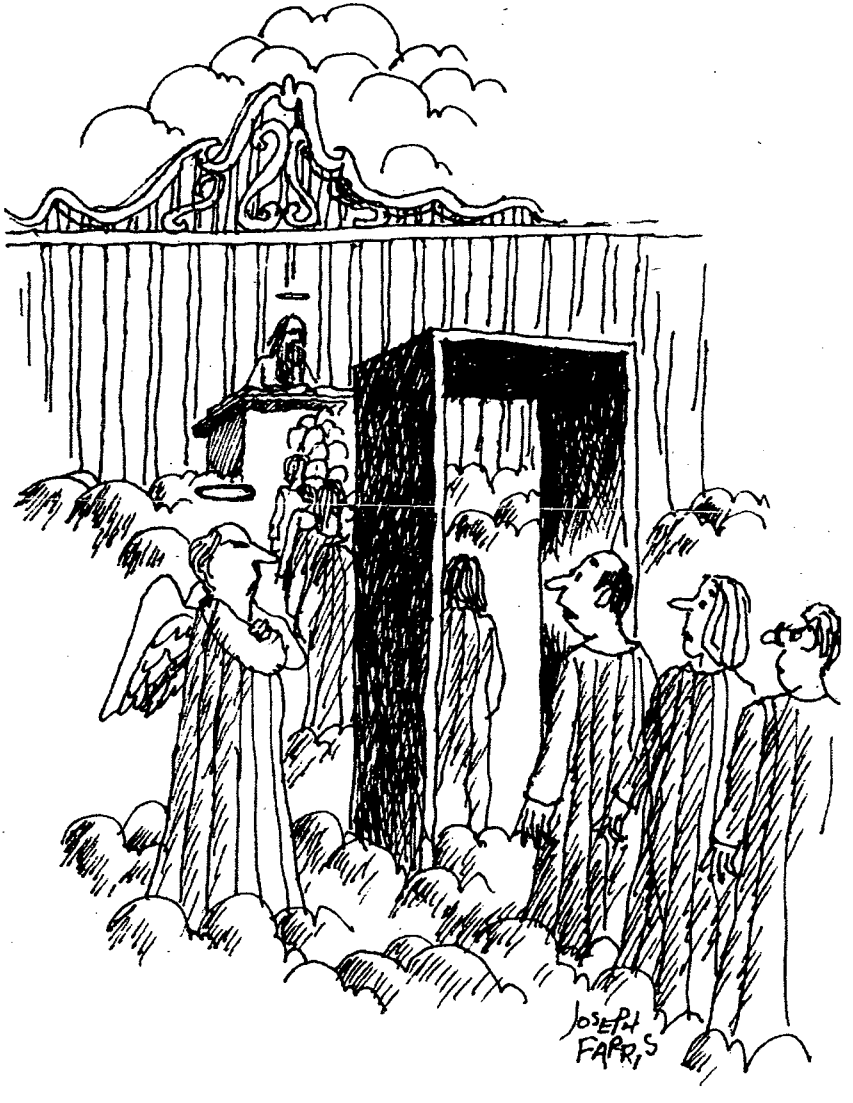

"Here too!"

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Rich Mueller published a handful of stories in F&SF *back in the 1980s, then let Hollywood's siren call lure him into writing for television, particularly animation. (He notes with bemusement that a character named after him once appeared on* The A-Team.*) While he still lives in Hollywood, he's back to writing prose and recently published a children's book entitled* Zoonauts: The Secret of Animalville. *His new story for us, much like Sheila Finch's tale in this issue, takes us to the high seas and the results are very dark and powerful.*

Jew if by Sea

By Richard Mueller

I FOUND BROUSSART huddled over the farthest table, where the crooked stone wall makes a turn and seabirds sometimes perch to watch for opportunities among the diners. He had placed his *Capitaine*'s coat on the wall to keep the gulls at bay and was mulling over a disreputable stack of papers held down against the breeze by a heavy piece of dark metal, a fist-sized gear of polished steel. "Souvenir?" I asked.

"Yes," he grunted. "A remembrance of *de Brazza*."

The colonial sloop *Savorgnan de Brazza* had been Broussart's last ship. When the Free French Navy had run out of steam and shut down, Broussart was promoted to *Capitaine*, beached, and given the choice of release in Mauritius or transportation back to metropolitan France. Since the only ships going to France these days were German or Vichy, Broussart decided to become a Mauritian. The last I had heard he was working with the British as a liaison officer but, being French, he seldom spoke of such things. ("Liaison to what exactly?" I asked. "Ah ha, yes, you see perfectly," he replied.) Liaison, of course, meaning intelligence. As I opened

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the chess board, Broussart shuffled the papers together and jammed them into a patch pocket on his coat. His "reports." I thought this was pretty shabby for an intelligence officer.

"You've never heard of a briefcase?" I asked, turning the gear over in my hands. It was very dense, solid, as if it were responsible for controlling and moving many other gears. A Chief Engineer of gears. Broussart sniffed.

"Briefcases cost money."

"A paper bag then."

"Undignified."

"Suit yourself." I laid out the pieces on the board: black for Broussart, white for me. Broussart always played black, claiming that he was part Negro. He also claimed to be part Jew, part Gypsy, part Slav, part anything else that the Germans hated. "I won last time," I said, "so first move to the French."

"I am only part French."

"Yeah, I know."

We played five or six desultory moves, unsettled and tentative, as the fishing boats moved in and out of Port Louis and patrolling Warwicks watched the sea. It was only 130 miles to Reunion where the swastika-tricolor flew. The peace that kept the intervening waters quiet was little more than a pause, a breathless truce that flickered uneasily like a guttering candle.

"Your mind is elsewhere."

"Always," he said.

"Must be nice." I took a knight. Broussart shrugged, sniffed, and turned his eyes seaward. A whiff of diesel smoke. I caught it too.

"One of yours?" I followed his gaze. A submarine was blowing its tanks near the outer buoy. As the water streamed from her conning tower, a helicopter swooped low over the deck. A pilot boat and a Fairmile launch were also racing to meet it.

"Australian, I think. An A-class. I didn't know that any of the big ones were out here." Mauritius was the last westward dot of the British Pacific Empire, existing only by dint of the truce. If Germany decided she had built up enough venom for another strike, this island would be the first to go, and an American base here wouldn't stop it.

We played a few more rounds.

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The world had been at a general peace for eight months. Uneasy peace, like a poor man's sleep: never at rest, a rat's nest of interlocking treaties and truces. Undeclared peace and dormant war. As executive officer of the *U.S.S. Unicorn*, I spent most of my time patrolling the waters between Cape Agulhas and Dondra Head. We were supposed to be a deterrent to the Germans and their territorial ambition, not that there was that much territory in the Indian Ocean left to protect. South Afrika and India had each declared their independence and everything in the vast arc between them was either Pan-Arab, Deutsch-Afrikan, Vichy French or seething in some complicated tribal anarchy. Only Mauritius and Ceylon were still held by the British, and though President Dewey had sworn to continue the Grand Alliance and back the British defense of the remaining free world, Americans had grown tired of the war. Treaties sworn, promised, and whispered were bound to disappear; but until they did we were still here.

The breeze turned round from the south, picked up a knot or two of strength, and brought a chill. I pulled my coat tighter about me but Broussart seemed oblivious to the cold. He was probably part Eskimo as well. He studied the pieces, smoking continuously and humming under his breath.

"Have you been to Madagascar, Andre?"

"Yes. Many times."

"What's it like?"

"Big, hot, nasty. Full of monkeys and Jews."

The Germans had been resettling the Jews there since shortly after the fall of France. Two million at last count, if you believed the statements of Herr Doktor Goebbels, which most of us did not. "You believe about the Jews?"

"Yes, as you know — "

"You're part Jewish, yeah," I said. "But you haven't been there since the *Boche* arrived."

"But I have."

I looked at Broussart. He seemed entirely serious, yet he did not appear to be the sort of agent who would be landed from a submarine in the dead of night. More like a railway station agent. "When?"

"About a month after the cease fire when you were still based in

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Australia. There was a Truce Commission for the Indian Ocean area. It met at Diego Suarez. The British put a Royal Navy uniform on me and took me along as interpreter to deal with the Vichy. The Germans were very proper; stiff. You know what they're like. They confined us to the port district but the town was busy, productive, and full of Jews."

"You could tell?"

Broussart shrugged. "They looked Jewish, I think. Shabby, downcast, yet defiant in that way they have. They wore the yellow star. Their relations with the Germans were..."

"Friendly?"

"Hardly. Proper and correct. I saw no brutality or even coercion. More like the British here; pleasant, prewar colonial style. A caste system."

"Did you see SS?"

"Yes."

"Gestapo?"

"Who can say?"

"And it was peaceful?"

"Peaceful enough."

The Germans claimed to have resettled Jews in Russia, Algeria, Madagascar, even Finland, but there was a lot of debate on the question. Most of the peace parties back in the States were willing to believe it and back off, while the Warhawk Democrats claimed it was all eyewash. I didn't know what to think. My job was to watch their ships and go where the Navy sent us. If it came to it, I'd sink them, or they'd sink me. From what I knew of their new Type XXV boats, I wouldn't give our *TENCH* class much of an edge, but no one was paying me to live forever.

Broussart pointed across the patio. "Is he for you?"

Ensign Crockett, our lanky young Gunnery Officer, was snaking between the tables, heading our way. He saluted.

"Sir, we have a four-hour recall to sail, but you're to report to the squadron commander on the double."

"Me?"

Crockett smiled. "Seems like you're in command, Skipper."

I heard the noon gun from the harbor battery just as I tapped on Captain Carpenter's door. "Come."

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I saluted.

"At ease, Andrews." He waved me to a chair. "You heard about Commander Picerni?"

"Yessir. Just now. A heart attack?"

Carpenter scratched his bluish stubble. "I guess it got past the physical. He's out of submarines now and I don't have a replacement — so you're it, Lieutenant." He handed me a manila folder. "Look at these."

I did. They were line drawings of what appeared at first to be a rather pedestrian-looking ocean liner. The legend named it the *Peter Strasser*. "What is she, sir?"

"Intelligence says it's a repatriation transport and they're not sure what that means, but there's at least one of them in the Indian Ocean. It could be a supply ship, a U-boat mother ship, an attack transport, even a missile carrier. ComSubWest wants us to find it and find out."

How, I thought? Ask to go aboard for a tour? But I replied, "Aye, aye, sir. Just *Unicorn*?"

"*Roncador* will run from south of Rodrigues to the Mozambique Channel. *Guavina* will cover a line from here to the Persian Gulf. They'll be patrolling with orders to watch for the *Strasser* but they are mostly cover. You will take *Unicorn* up the east coast of Madagascar to Socotra and then run box patrols in the Gulf of Aden."

I studied the large map on the wall, marked with colliding jurisdictions and intersecting arcs. "Sir, we'll be well within the Aden patrol circle."

"Yes."

"I understand that the krauts are pretty touchy about anyone getting close to the Red Sea. Suez...."

Carpenter regarded me with a long, silent question, probably trying to decide whether he'd made a mistake, if he should give the job to someone else, but when he spoke he surprised me by echoing my thoughts. "You're wondering why I didn't pick a more senior man for this job. Someone with more experience of command."

I nodded, trying to look as if I fully understood, because the only ship I'd ever commanded was a training sub in Puget Sound and Carpenter knew it.

"Relax, Lieutenant."

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I tried, suddenly conscious of the background sounds of Mauritius. Seabirds called over the anchorage, the ceiling fans whirred and thumped, and the breeze brought the faint sound of native music. Carpenter leaned forward. It was not a gesture of conspiracy or comradeship. He did it to take a kink out of his back, injured last year when his sub had hit a mine off Honshu.

"You'll get a set of orders for a routine patrol. You'll exceed those orders in the manner I've described. An older, more seasoned officer wouldn't do that; at least not the captains under my command. It wouldn't be plausible."

"Yessir." He had meant that they wouldn't risk their careers or their ships.

"You'll find the *Strasser*, find out what you can about her, then come home."

"And if we're attacked?"

"You may take any measures you deem appropriate to defend yourselves, but try not to restart the war."

WE WERE QUITE HAPPY to sail in a ship called the *Unicorn*, though initially few of us were aware of the symbolism. Like all American submarines, *Unicorn* was named for a fish, another name for *Monodon monoceros*, the narwhal. Up until modern times, horns of the seagoing unicorn often turned up in antiquarian hordes and were thought to be from the hoofed unicorns, the mythical horse variety, a creature that never existed except in folklore. It was Greiner who told us what unicorns signified.

Moe Greiner was our Radioman's Mate, our RM2. He had a Masters in European history with a minor in English Literature. He spoke at least four languages (English, German, Latin, and Yiddish) with enough linguistic backwash to get along in French, Italian, and Hebrew. He was our all-purpose intellectual and well respected, the moreso that he hailed from Brooklyn and had once played shortstop for a Dodgers farm club.

"They're a symbol of purity," Moe had told us early in our commission. "They may only be approached by the purest of maidens." He smiled. "Which means the sort of women of which none of you are familiar."

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There was a ripple of laughter. "I hope not," someone muttered.

"They are also a symbol of purity of purpose, of the essential innocence of decency, of the quest for the right, of honor — "

"Right up there with the Holy Grail," Chief Perry said. Like Moe, our Chief Engineer was a reader. "All of the Arthurian stuff."

Moe nodded. "The roots are in chivalry, at a time when people, some people, believed in the idea of a just war, fought cleanly, with rules."

A just war, fought cleanly with rules. Some journalist had dubbed it "the American way of war — fought hard and relentlessly, yet with kindness and decency to the defeated foe." That was before Kyushu and Honshu, where they just kept killing us, whatever the toll in blood. Where they refused to give up until we were napalming anything that moved. MacArthur's draconian methods had finally ended the Japanese resistance but at such a cost that the survivors would hate us for a thousand years.

As *Unicorn* worked her way north through the Seychelles, running surfaced at night, our lookouts and Sugar William radar kept us on edge, ready to dive at any provocation. I tried to relax into the mission but it was my first command; the greatest responsibility I could carry for a ship and the lives of eighty men, and I could never fully rest. I haunted the bridge, the conn, the wardroom, saying little and probably driving the crew crazy, though no one mentioned it. They gave me a good deal of leeway, which was understandable since I had their lives in my hands. Old lives, of old, young men. There's something about trying to establish routine in the Valley of the Shadow of Death that darkens men's souls and makes them old before their time.

It was more or less routine, as we worked our way northward. During the day we ran submerged, avoiding known minefields and taking periscope photos of every island, port, and ship we encountered. At night we made better time on the surface, recharging our batteries. We saw a few freighters, a German destroyer, fishing boats, and aircraft, though the Kriegsmarine had not yet developed much of a night ASW capability. As we had a trained and seasoned crew, I primarily supervised the ship's routine, filled out the log pages, and played chess with our supercargo.

Andre Broussart had been just as surprised as I, not that he'd admitted it. He'd arrived on the dock clad in British submarine kit and carrying a duffle. His grumbled, "I had a date," gave away any later attempt to

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convince me that he had known about this (and every other movement in the Indian Ocean) all along.

"Yes," I chuckled. "After all, you're part American." He just scowled.

After ten days I was beating him evenly at chess and we were both beginning to believe that the hunt for the *Peter Strasser* was a wild goose chase. Broussart was along ostensibly as liaison, but he quickly confided in me that his family business back in France had been concerned with shipyards.

"Freighters, coasters, fishing boats," he said one evening as we pored over the drawing of the *Strasser*. "Not little ones; the big South Atlantic whalers. Our yard built the *Jacques Cartier*."

"Which is...?"

"Was," he grumped. "A giant whale factory ship. She was sunk off South Georgia in '42. What do you make of this?"

"This" was three rows of windows along the upper decks of the *Strasser*, each row bordered by rectangular lines. The rows were of identical size and ran three-quarters of the ship's length. There was no reason to have them. "Decoration?" I asked.

"I doubt it," Andre replied. "Windows like this aren't practical. On a ship in wartime — "

"Not windows then, but a gallery framing some sort of promenade deck. Where did this drawing originate?"

Andre shrugged and puffed, his cigarette smoke leaving a blue mist in the air of my cabin. "Some agent with an artistic bent in Aden or Suez. It's a very good line drawing but it is not a blueprint. It says that the thing is five hundred and fifty feet long."

"Big. But why build this in wartime? Germany and Italy have liners, theirs and yours, Dutch, Swedish. This is new."

"These galleries could hide guns."

I shook my head. "No one would build a merchant cruiser from scratch. Besides, there are too many warships and aircraft and not enough neutral flags left to hide behind."

"Missiles? Aircraft? Mines?"

"There's no point," I said firmly. "They're either something else or nothing at all." And so they remained as we ran north.

Then we found him.

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We were two days south of Socotra. That night we'd avoided an Italian squadron comprising a *Littorio*-class battleship, two cruisers, and four destroyers, sailing around in that corner of the Indian Ocean that the Germans had let them keep. As we surfaced in their wake, the night moonless but spread brightly with equatorial stars, we almost ran over him. Seaman Bone, our best lookout, spotted him before anyone.

"Object on the port bow, Sir."

Through the glasses it looked at first like a log. "Skipper," said Tompkinson, our First Lieutenant, "I think there's a man on that thing."

"All stop. Pick him up."

He was alive. We carried him below to Doc Gordon. Broussart and I waited in the passageway until the Doc came out.

"How is he, Leo?"

Leo Gordon spread his broad flat hands and passed me the clipboard. "Better than he has any right to be. These are shark waters and my guess is he's been on that log for days. And, I think he's a Jew."

"That would explain why he'd risk the sharks," Broussart said. "Better company than the *Boche*, for a Jew."

"His clothes are European. Shabby. No identification but a number tattooed on his arm."

"He say anything?"

"Yeah, but I can't make it out," Gordon said. "It sounds German."

"Get Greiner."

We waited while Moe went in to talk to the man, who appeared debilitated but calm, lying flat on his back, blinking at the bright lights of our makeshift dispensary. After a few minutes Greiner stepped out into the passageway.

"The language you heard was Polish," he said, rubbing his bearded chin, a prognathous jaw that went well with his blocky frame. "I don't speaka da Polack, but he also speaks Yiddish, which I do know. His name is Hershel Dubrovski, he's starving, exhausted, and I think something really horrible happened to him."

Broussart snorted. "Of course it did. He's a Jew."

Two days later we lay on the ocean floor off Cape Ras Aser and heard a recovering though still weak Hershel Dubrovski tell his story. There were three of us; Broussart, Greiner, and I. Greiner also ran the wire

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recorder. What follows is an edited transcript of Hershel Dubrovski's story as translated by RM2 Moe Greiner:

"I grew up in southern Poland and was in Krakow when the war began. I knew that I should have left; run, run anywhere, but I was part of a large family. There were parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces and cousins in great profusion. Four generations. As far as I know, I am the only survivor.

"We were scattered to the winds. Before the war I had been a hydraulic engineer for the city government of Krakow, but the Nazis made me a farm laborer and sent me first to East Prussia and later to the Ukraine.

"After the Fall of France, and then the British Isles, the Germans turned on Russia. We heard about Turkey and the British having to give up Africa. We worked and we died, but as long as we grew crops they did not often kill us.

"Always we heard of resettlement. In the north, east in Siberia, in Africa and Madagascar. Special ships were being built. There would be subservient Jewish states but we would be allowed to live. Then, last winter, we were told that our farms were going to be resettled with ethnic Germans. We were to make ready to go to Madagascar. Germans from the SS came to our farms and lectured us about Madagascar: about the forests, the animals, the climate, the work we would have. They explained that we would be autonomous. We would have our own culture and, so long as we remained peaceful and productive, we would be protected. Some of us believed all of it, some believed none of it. Most of us expected some amount of sorrow, perhaps with a silver lining. We Jews have made our way for centuries. We survived Babylon and Rome. We would survive the Nazis.

"Ten, maybe twelve weeks ago we were marched to the trains. As always, they sealed us in freight cars but the ride was short. A day and a night brought us to Sevastopol, which the Germans have made into a resort. We were allowed to clean up at the station and then we were marched to the docks. There were few guards. We were going to our own land. We were happy. Besides, there was nowhere to run.

"There were three ships, all the same, and clean and new as these things go. Ours was named the *Gorch Fock* and she looked like the picture you showed me. We were to be carried on three decks on each side, and

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when I saw the accommodation I was puzzled. There were fifteen hundred of us in our compartment. It was very long, with doors on each end that we were not allowed to pass through. On the inner wall there were painted murals of pastoral scenes but no doors or windows. There were tracks or grooves in the steel decking, perhaps every twenty feet apart, running from the inner wall to the outer and in the outer wall were open gallery windows where we could stand and watch the sights passing: the Black Sea, the Bosphorus, Egypt, and the Suez Canal. Most of us had never even seen the ocean before. We felt exhilarated and alive for perhaps the first time in years.

"The accommodations consisted of screens and simple furniture, which we could arrange as we saw fit. Soon we had apartments and rooms in place, with lavatories built over holes in the deck designed for that purpose. Food was delivered. It was very basic and prepared in advance, but it was plentiful. There were two SS officials, a man and a woman, assigned to answer our questions and requests and they seemed solicitous and kind. A shipboard society quickly grew up. We were required to do no work. We were on holiday.

"I knew about a score of people who had come from my farm and we held long discussions about what was awaiting us. Most of us were cheerful and optimistic. I had my doubts. The ship seemed strange, and from my background as a hydraulic engineer it seemed that much of it did not make sense. I could not imagine that anyone would design a ship like this but then, the Germans had won the war. Perhaps this was based on new mechanical discoveries of which I had no knowledge.

"It was after we entered the Indian Ocean that we discovered what all of this meant.

"The night was moonlit and the wind was out of the east. I am not sure, but I think that those conditions had something to do with the fact that I am still alive.

"I was standing at the gallery windows with my friend Moshe Morser. We were watching the sea. We knew that we were close to Madagascar and we would be there in less than a week. Moshe was a printer and looked forward to finding work in his field. The colony must have a newspaper, perhaps several. Even the Germans must need things printed. Then we smelled it.

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"At first we thought that the ship must be flushing its sanitary tanks, but I had worked in the farm's butcher shop and I knew that smell for what it was. Blood and offal. They were pumping quantities of it into the sea, but for what purpose I could not guess. Until we saw the sharks.

"They were drawn by the blood and came in ones and twos and tens until there were a hundred or more following the ship. Of course the same thing had to have been happening on the other side. At that point I had a terrible feeling that I knew what must come next, though I did not know how. Then the sound began.

"It was like a great dam opening its floodgates — huge motors, gigantic grinding gears, and then a terrible vibration in the deck. The night lighting went out and people began to scream. And then I saw that the inner wall was beginning to move outward, pushing everything before it: furniture, belongings and people. The wall was compressing us all toward the gallery windows. At first we thought it was a mistake and we beat on the doors but they were not opened as the wall rolled on the tracks set into the floor, squeezing fifteen hundred of us together. Then the gallery walls began to lift, opening the side of the ship, and the first people began to fall out.

"We fought, we prayed, we pleaded, we tried to stop the wall with our bodies, but we fell into the sea all the same, splashing down among the trunks and suitcases and furniture. Some hit the lifted gallery walls below us but there was no place to hang on. Some who knew that I had been an engineer begged me to find a way to stop it but of course there was nothing I could do. I beat on the walls until I, too, was pushed over.

"The fact that I hit the water and nothing else, that I didn't pass out, that I was able to climb aboard a trunk and hang on is the only proof I have that God was watching. Why he saw fit to save me while nine thousand others perished that night I do not know. I do not have to tell you what I saw and heard that night and the next day and night as the sharks came and killed everyone and turned the sea red.

"By the second morning it was over and I was still alive. The sharks were gone and the seabirds were finishing the job. I managed to stay alive for three more days until I reached an uninhabited island where I remained for six weeks. Then, two days ago, a German patrol ship arrived and put a landing party ashore. I knew they were looking for people like me, so I took to the sea. I was trying to reach another island when you found me."

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We left Greiner and Dubrovski conversing quietly in Yiddish. Later Greiner pulled the curtains on the Radio Room and got quickly, quietly, and illegally drunk. Instead of preferring charges, I had Chief Perry put him to bed.

I attended to the changing of the watch and told Tompkinson to surface the boat an hour after sunset and set a course for Costivy Island in the Seychelles. Then I went to my cabin and began to study the charts.

It was reasonably easy, if you knew the winds and ocean currents, to backtrack Dubrovski to his island. And from there I could estimate where the *Gorch Fock* had dumped its human cargo.

The German Racial planners were clever. They would have researched water depth and shark activity and timed the drops for nights when wind and weather conditions were right. They could hold a ship at Aden until a storm had passed and thus insure that their disposal system worked perfectly. And they were methodical. They would return to the same spot again and again with hundreds of thousands of victims until such time as the sea would give up her dead in the light of the world to come. Leave it to them to design such a solution.

There was a tap on the door. Broussart looked pale and I could tell that he, too, had been drinking. We had done our best to keep the crew from finding out about Dubrovski's story, but submarines are like small towns, and the word had passed swiftly. The men were, by degrees, depressed, fearful, or quietly angry. War was one thing, but this —

"I know," Broussart said, offering me his flask. I waved it away. "Trust the Germans to come up with something so monstrous. Sharks. My God!"

Broussart had sailed these waters far longer than I had. "Andre, could that happen? Could sharks kill so many? Might there be other survivors?"

"I do not know, Gregory, but these Jews came from Poland, Slovakia, the Baltic States, the Ukraine. Farmers and townsmen. I'd bet that few could swim and the ones who could were probably pulled under by those panicking around them. You wouldn't even need sharks, except to clean up the evidence."

Trust the Germans. My mother was second generation German, her family from the east bank of the Rhein. America was full of Germans,

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most of whom would be sick with fury if they knew. I couldn't believe that the average German in Germany could condone this either. "Andre, how big do you think this is?"

"God help me, I do not know. Dubrovski saw three identical ships. They have been building them for the purpose. How many? Dozens? A hundred, a thousand, like your Liberty ships? Sailing out of every port in Europe, loaded with Jews going to their new homeland, then coming back empty to pick up more while the sharks feed. And when they run out of Jews? Blacks and Arabs perhaps. Slavs and Poles, Balkans, Balts, then finally even the French and Spanish until the entire German world is populated solely with Aryans. Tell me, *Capitaine*, is that possible?"

I said nothing. After a long moment I pushed the map over to him. "I think," I said at last, "that we had better find out."

We lay quietly on the surface, in and out of drifting patches of fog, waiting. There was a full complement of lookouts and gunners topside and others lurked in the hatches, listening, waiting to know and act. The American need to achieve justice through action. These men were not war-weary. They were skilled, motivated, and dangerous, and I was in command.

I knew about regulations, that I had been verbally ordered to exceed my written orders. But how far? Not enough, or too much, and it became the old service trap: investigation, court martial, and sentence.

I stood on the bridge with Broussart, Greiner, and Herschel Dubrovski. The lookouts' binoculars were useless in the fog but above us the radar scoop was turning smoothly, probing the darkness. "You know that whatever happens we cannot prevent it," said Broussart.

"I know."

"We're here only to witness."

"Yes."

"Jew if by sea," Greiner muttered. I looked at him.

"What?"

He blinked at me but did not back away. "One if by land, Jew if by sea," he said softly. "And I on the opposite shore will be."

"That's enough, Greiner."

"Yessir."

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The intercom buzzed. It was Tompkinson. "Skipper, we've got a good-sized target bearing Starboard Six-Oh at eight thousand yards."

"Steer to intercept. Take us in at eight knots." Greiner was nodding, his head moving in little bobs, his lips moving silently. I grabbed his arm and pushed him toward the hatch.

WE CLOSED ON the target at periscope depth. She was running with lights, indicating a merchantman, but her boxy silhouette soon revealed her for what she was. As she bore down on us we ducked into a patch of fog. "Take her up," I said quietly. "Decks awash."

With just the top half of our conning tower above the water we presented a difficult target for the German radar, but at any rate they were busy with other things. The ship came on slowly. At first the smell was faint but the damp fogs carried it to us. I looked at Dubrovski, who touched his nose and nodded. As he did, I saw the fin of a large shark sweep by us in the mist. I touched the intercom button. "Ready, Mr. Tompkinson?"

"Aye, aye, Sir."

The German ship had slowed to a few knots of headway. It couldn't be more than a thousand yards away. Dubrovski and I and the lookouts waited. Below, standing at the base of the ladder, Broussart was watching me through the open hatch. I glanced at Dubrovski again. His eyes were closed and his lips were moving, his head bobbing like Greiner's. He was praying.

We heard it all from where we were. First the grinding mechanical sounds of the moving walls, then the cries of the people betrayed, the splashes, and finally the terrible screams from the water. The lookouts swore and Dubrovski tried to shut it out as I focused in on the ship with my glasses.

"What are you doing, *Capitaine*?" Broussart had climbed up far enough to stick his head through the hatch. I continued to watch the ship, waiting.

"Exceeding my orders."

"Yes, but — "

Then I saw it. The gallery walls were closing. The murderers were

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finished, their cargo unloaded, and ready to sail for home. Below in the water, their victims were dying. "Ready, Mr. Tompkinson?"

"Yessir."

"Fire Tubes One and Two."

The boat gave a lurch as the two torpedoes left their tubes, curved, and streaked toward the ship. "What have you done?" Broussart wailed. I kept my eyes on the ship.

Both fish hit amidships almost simultaneously with a terrific roar and a submerged detonation that must have killed some of those in the water. There was no cheering aboard our sub. I watched the death ship heel rapidly over, too quickly for her crew to lower the boats. They would go into the water with the Jews and take their chances with the sharks.

Broussart pounded on the deck. "Do you know what you've done? You've started the war all over again!"

"What makes you think it ever stopped?" I replied.

We surfaced and moved into the wreckage, distributing all of our rafts and covering our deck with terrified, bewildered survivors. Our marksmen did their best to keep the sharks away but when we left a half hour later they were still running wild among the screaming survivors. There was nothing more that we could do.

We could not stay on the surface and we could not submerge with people on deck, so we sailed for the island that Dubrovski had reached and just before dawn we landed over three hundred survivors. Dubrovski went with them, to show them the way, to try to give them a fighting chance. Some of our rifles and pistols went with them. It wasn't much, but it was something. Twelve women and children we kept aboard to take back to Mauritius.

Later that day, as we were heading due east away from the sinking, Greiner came by my cabin. "Sir?"

"Come in," I said. "Coffee?"

"No thank you, sir. There's a lot of German radio traffic. It seems they've got a ship missing. No details. I guess those bastards we sank didn't get a radio signal off. High Command doesn't know it was torpedoed."

"They will soon enough," I said. "Anything else?"

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Greiner obviously wanted to say something comforting, but all he could come up with was, "I hope they give you a medal, Sir."

Not much chance of that, I thought. Not for restarting the war. But I smiled. "Thanks, Moe. You go back to your radio."

Then I lay back, content to await events as we shaped our course for Mauritius.

For Marc Wedner

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH WE'LL feature a new story by Joe Haldeman. In "Faces," he takes us to La-la Land, but for once we don't mean Hollywood. No, this La-la Land refers to a planet with some strange alien landscaping to show off. This story's classic science fiction.

On the fantasy side of the coin, we'll be venturing "After the Gaud Chrysalis" in Charles Coleman Finlay's new heroic fantasy tale. This one follows Kuiken and Vertir (we met them last March) on a rousing journey in the company of...a nun?!?

We also hope to bring you a new story by Matthew Hughes next month, along with an uncanny tale by Kit Reed and much more.

Our July issue looks to be a special theme issue. We'll say more next month; for right now, let it suffice to say that we've got stories lined up by R. Garcia y Robertson, Esther M. Friesner, and James Stoddard that are as appealing as fresh-baked apple pie.

We'll also have our usual reviewers and columnists on hand, and in months to come we'll bring you new stories by A. A. Attanasio, Dale Bailey, and Richard Chwedyk, and Bradley Denton (just to cover the A's through D's). Subscribe now to make sure you'll get all the goodies, from A to Z.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THEY KNOW ACTION, BUT THEY DON'T KNOW DICK

OVER THE past twenty years, the works of Philip K. Dick have become the hottest sf based-upons in Hollywood. Many have speculated on the reason. True believers think it's the cosmic inevitability of PKD's epistemological genius, which has the power to reach even the soul-dead executives of the major studios. (But these folks are, conversely, so outraged by how the holy writ has been distorted and defiled by movie makers that they wish the current and planned screen adaptations would just go away.) Others simply see the late great author's themes as highly relevant, and then some.

Dickian "paranoia" about corporate and government iniquity certainly speaks even more eloquently to a society faced with a steady stream of news stories about Enrons, Halliburtons, and the frightening examples of governmental surveillance and detentions that have occurred since 9-11 and the passage of the PATRIOT Act. But Philip K. Dick isn't the only sf author to explore such issues. Nor is he the only author to ruminate on the nature of reality and humanity.

As talented and timely a writer as Mr. Dick is, his Hollywood hot property status probably has less to do with him or his literary executors than it does with a gentleman named Ridley Scott. The film industry leeches on literature, it's true. But it absolutely *feasts* upon itself. *Blade Runner* (1982), a screenplay by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, based upon PKD's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, was directed with such style and verve by Scott that Hollywood took

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notice. That, despite the fact that the film did less than booming box office when it was first released.

The full screen potential of science fiction could not be denied after *Blade Runner* (and Scott's previous space creature feature, *Alien*). Visual flair, philosophical substance, and kick-ass action can come together to make an entertaining and artistically compelling movie. *Blade Runner* proved that. Unfortunately, although major and minor studios as well as independent and international filmmakers have gone back to the well of Dickian fact and fiction again and again since 1982, none of the resulting films have equaled Scott's influential masterwork.

But that doesn't keep them from trying.

Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) is the most recent high-profile entry. It's a handsome film — certainly better than *A.I.* — but ultimately rather tedious and falsely sentimental, as Spielberg films have a tendency to be. And now we have another PKD adaptation. A much, much different film that, while not a complete offense against the viewing public, manages to lose the wonder of its Dickian story in the pyrotechnics of conventional filmmaking.

Paycheck, based on the 1953 Dick short story by the same name, features a screenplay by Dean Georgaris. And the adaptation isn't half bad. In some ways — sacrilege alert to all PKD devotees — it actually improves on the source material. My own feeling about Dick's original "Paycheck" is that it presents a dandy story concept but that the narrative collapses at the end.

The basic conceit, as most of you probably remember, is that an electrical "mechanic" named Jennings does a top secret job for a mysterious company. Upon leaving the job, he learns that his authoritarian government is acutely interested in his work. However, even if our hero were interested in betraying his former employer, he cannot. To protect the company, Jennings's memory of his work had been erased before he left his job. And in even more bad news, when he goes to pick up his pay, Jennings learns to his shock that he has forfeited his salary for a handful of trinkets. Things are not looking good for the poor schmo. But soon, Jennings realizes that the seemingly worthless bits and pieces he possesses are actually the key to his successful navigation of his perilous immediate future.

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Like I say, it's one corker of a story idea. It's the way it played out that left me less than thrilled.

I was never convinced that Rethrick Construction and its autocratic CEO were any more benign than the government with its Security Police. And Jennings, the ingenious yet naïve hero of the story, has an inflated sense of his own sex appeal if he thinks that the female office manager at Rethrick would be the best choice as an ally in skullduggery against the company she's worked for for years. At the tale's end, we are left with the strangest possible happy ending: A new family is formed from an uppity blackmailer, a tired yet faintly megalomanaical magnate, and a dutiful daughter. Even without the future-capturing mirror and "scoop" of the plot, I could predict something less than domestic and corporate bliss for Dick's characters.

Mr. Georgaris retains PKD's basic story idea, but (as all those pesky Dickian adaptors are wont to do) changes and updates at will. Some of the changes are made to reflect the current cultural Zeitgeist. Americans distrust the government, but — at the moment — not as much as they distrust Big Business. Therefore, the police, as represented by FBI agents Dodge (Joe Morton) and Klein (Michael C. Hall), are actually portrayed as a lesser evil than the nefarious industrialist, Rethrick (Aaron Eckhart), and his many associates and goons.

Mr. Georgaris also deep-sixes the time "scoop" idea — good choice, that — in favor of a time machine that simply views the future. He also throws in the standard modern movie "buddy." In this case, he is a well-intentioned memory-erasure technician, Shorty, played with his standard offbeat charm by Paul Giamatti. (Is the Shorty character necessary? Nah! But since Giamatti is one of the more enjoyable aspects of the film, I can't complain about him being there.)

As for the role of the girl, as befits twenty-first-century movie sensibilities, she has been promoted from the secretarial pool and transformed into a research biologist who can kickbox with the best of them. But, of course, she is still a babe. Here, named Rachel, and played by Uma Thurman.

The screenplay isn't without its time paradox violations and its not-so-little absurdities, but the biggest problem I have with *Paycheck* has little to do with its plot or character development. It largely fails as a movie because it too forcefully tries

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to identify itself as an action (and I do mean ACTION) film. I could blame this mindless pursuit of the conventions of a hackneyed formula on the screenwriter, but something tells me it has more to do with the director helming the project. In this case, that director would be the brilliant Hong Kong hyper-violence auteur, John Woo.

Mr. Woo's career has generally floundered since he arrived in Hollywood. His talents simply do not superimpose well upon the kinds of movie properties with which he has been entrusted. *Paycheck* is not as explosively miserable as *Windtalkers*, Woo's earlier mangling of the story of the Navajo code-talkers of WWII, but it is clearly a bad match between material and director.

Yes, *Paycheck* should have been a thriller. But it was meant to be a suspenseful yarn with subtle twists and frequent surprises. Its storyline is poorly served by the kind of over-the-top shootouts, chases, and shattering sets that are the stock in trade of John Woo. If the hero needs to get away from both corporate baddies and the feds, he is forced to lead a ten-minute motorcycle chase through city streets, causing vehicles to careen and crash endlessly, before he ends up in a stockyard where gravel flies, and so does he, through a very convenient but highly improbable tunnel made up of countless box trailers, all handily open on both ends.

Want a clichéd almost-run-down-by-a-train scene? Why not? Perhaps, when forced to defend himself, the hero should turn out to be an expert at kung-fu stick fighting. Sounds like a plan! And in the movie's conclusion, why not blow everything in sight to kingdom come, with fire and showering glass shards kerplewing in every direction. Destroy everything and everyone — except the hero and his girl, of course — both of whom come out looking like they've suffered nothing more than a rough day at the office.

I have heard a good bit of grumbling about the fact that *Paycheck*'s hero, updated as a high-tech reverse engineer, is played by Ben Affleck. But I really don't think that Affleck is the worst of this film's worries. As I have commented before (when I recently reviewed *Daredevil*), dear Ben is certainly not the greatest thespian of his generation. And with his very sleek good looks, he is hardly my idea of a believable techie nerd, either. (Wouldn't it be fun to reshoot this movie with Paul Giamatti in the lead?)

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However, cocky and tense are two emotions that Ben Affleck just about has mastered. He doesn't need much more than that to pull off the role of Michael Jennings. And, really, folks, he is no more unbelievable as a research scientist than the even more beauteous Greg Peck was as a psychiatrist in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. Affleck is a Hollywood leading man. He is capable of holding our attention and our sympathies at least as well as *Minority Report*'s Tom Cruise (who has always made my skin crawl and is also no virtuoso in the acting department). Ben can't, however, make *Paycheck* into the good movie it might have been. That would have required a director more interested in ideas and less interested in things that go boom.

John Woo is not that director.

Gary Fleder, on the other hand, might be.

Best known for this past autumn's *Runaway Jury*, the director actually helmed a PKD movie adaptation a few years back that few people have seen. *Impostor*, based on the story of the same name, was originally meant as a movie short for a trilogy feature. It was expanded to full-length for Dimension films, but then shelved by the studio for two years. It was thereafter quietly dumped onto the market, surfacing on late night cable and the back shelves of video stores.

Let me suggest that you dust off a copy and bring it home. For *Impostor* is a much better movie than *Paycheck* could ever hope to be.

True, *Impostor* has a small budget that sometimes shows, and Fleder's direction seems a bit shaky, at times. (But when a movie is expanded from short to feature, and written by a committee of screenwriters, I am inclined to give a guy the benefit of the doubt.) The film also sometimes substitutes darkness for true atmosphere. This is less of an issue on a large screen, but since you will probably be viewing it on a smallish TV screen, a certain amount of viewer frustration may result.

Yet despite its shortcomings, *Impostor* is a solid science fiction film. Not as elegant as *Blade Runner*, certainly. But a heck of a lot better than most of the other PKD screen conversions of the last two decades. One crucial difference is that the film relies on real acting instead of star turns. The hero of the movie, a defense research scientist named Spencer Olham, is played by Gary Sinise. One day, Olham is accused of not being who

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he believes himself to be by a ruthless security agent, Major Hathaway (Vincent D'Onofrio). Hathaway claims that Olham is actually a replicant smart bomb designed to do maximum damage. The major hopes to murder Olham before he can attack a beleaguered Earth. Olham hopes to stay alive long enough to prove his innocence.

With Sinise and D'Onofrio in the principal leads, you should already be heading for the video store. But this movie has more than solid acting to recommend it. It actually seems more interested in Dickian ruminations into the nature of reality and human identity than it does in blowing things up. Although guns are fired and explosions do occur, *Impostor* isn't afraid to slow things down a bit and substitute a bit of old-fashioned suspense for some of the standard-issue Hollywood violence. This movie is even brave enough to end on a very disquieting note.

No wonder the studio abandoned it!

Hollywood may be in love with the idea of adapting PKD. But only so it can say (as Paramount exclaims in its publicity squibs for *Paycheck*) that its movie comes from "the author who brought you *Minority Report* and *Blade Runner*."

Forget about *Paycheck*, and instead seek out *Impostor*. It's the genuine article.

"Whenever the Dow does something dramatic, it sets him off."

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Jim Kelly reports after having served for five years as a councilor, he has been appointed by the Governor of New Hampshire to serve as the Chairman of the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts. But please don't take his devilish new story as any indication of how he might be tempted to go about his duties...

Serpent

By James Patrick Kelly

YOU THINK IT'S EASY LIVING in the garden? The never-ending picnic — that's what your Bible says, doesn't it? That the people who live here just stroll around petting tigers and helping themselves to the Gardener's own salad bar? Oh, and having lots of sloppy, guiltless sex. Being fruitful. Multiplying. Why not? They've got nothing better to do. They have no checkbooks to balance, no periodic table to memorize. No poker or e-mail or *National Enquirer*.

Possibly you're surprised that there are still people in the garden. That isn't in your book, is it? Well, things have changed here since your lot got shown the gate. The Gardener decided to try again, except that He tinkered with His design this time around. Take sex, for instance. The Gardener made sex less fun — more like brushing your teeth with baking soda than eating dark chocolate with almonds. And He must have decided that there was something wonky about sexual dimorphism. because He did away with all your exaggerated curves and bulges. The innocents — they like to call themselves that, can you believe it? — are

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hermaphrodites. Everyone's got the same equipment, although it comes in a variety of sizes. And of course, nudity is not a problem for this batch; they are covered with a delicate, flat down that is more like feathers than hair.

The innocents are better stewards of the garden than you were. It's because the Gardener gave them peculiarly moral imaginations. Their art isn't worth much, but they see consequences around a corner and a mile away. They compost and practice sound forest management. When they slaughter an animal, they use just about all of it. They prefer horse to cow, antelope to deer. I'd say they like their meat stringy, except recently they've developed a taste for dodo. I claim credit for that — I'm not entirely helpless here. They don't eat fish, though, and have some odd notions about the sea. They think it's their heaven, although they take a pessimistic view of the afterlife. Too wet. Stings the eyes. I think they must get this from the angels.

I'm always telling them things about you that the angels leave out — all that you've accomplished. The fantasy trilogy. Penicillin. Titanium-framed bicycles. I keep up by eating of the Tree of Knowledge. It's better than the Internet. Of course, the angels insist on showing them all your mistakes, rehearsing the entire catalogue of your sins. Me, I'm willing to accept your sins; they're part of who you are. But to the innocents, you're Tuesday's leftovers. Ready for the compost pile. The angels have promised them that someday the Gardener will smite you all down and then the innocents will inherit the Earth.

So I'm tempting Skipping-Uphill-With-Delight, who is double-digging a new vegetable garden next to her house in Overhill. She has a broad, stolid face and has painted her ears blue. She sings under her breath as she patiently shovels the top layer of a two-foot square of soil into her wheelbarrow, then turns and breaks the square of earth beneath it. I decide to start with a joke. I've never heard an innocent laugh out loud, but they will smile if they're in the mood and say, "That's funny." The innocents understand more than you might expect, considering that they're basically living in the Late Iron Age.

This hiker is climbing a mountain when the trail she's on gives way and she slides down a steep slope that ends in a sheer cliff. Just as she goes

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over the edge, she clutches at a scrub pine. It holds but she finds herself dangling over a thousand-foot drop.

Arms aching, she calls out, "Is there anyone up there?"

She gets no answer.

She screams. "Oh god, is there anyone up there?"

"I AM," says a voice that cracks like lightning.

Despite her desperate situation, this voice fills the hiker with awe. "Who is that?"

*"**I AM**." Now the voice roars like the sea.*

"God, is that you?" she cries. "Will you help me?"

"Yes. But first you must let go."

"Let go?" she says, glancing down at the jagged rocks below her. "Why?"

"To show your faith in Me. If you let go, God will catch you up."

The hiker thinks this over, then calls out. "Is there anyone else up there?"

Skipping-Uphill-With-Delight leans on her shovel and stares at me with her pale yellow eyes. "I know what you're trying to do."

"Do you?"

"Have you heard of long line fishing boats?" she says. "They catch tuna using lines up to thirty miles long that carry thousands of hooks. Except seabirds and sharks and turtles get entangled in them, and they die for no good reason." She stabs the blade of the shovel into the soil and turns a new square. "And tunas are overfished, the population is less than a third of what it was thirty years ago."

The angels, again. I don't have to see them to know that they're everywhere. They give the innocents visions of your world and feed them all these meaningless numbers.

"You don't even like fish," I say. "You wouldn't know a tuna if one fell out of a tree and hit you on the head."

She shakes that off and then scoops leaf mold into the bed. "Then there's the Glen Canyon Dam." She tips the soil in the wheelbarrow back into the garden. "Flooded one of the most beautiful places on Earth. For what?" She pulls a rake across the soil, leveling the surface. "The intakes are silting in so it'll be useless by the end of the century. Meanwhile they

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lose almost a million acre-feet of water a year to evaporation and seepage."

"Actually, it's only 882,000." I try to stay calm. "And people just love Lake Powell."

She drops to her knees and runs hands over the ground as if blessing it. She flicks a pebble away.

"Two million Armenians were killed in the Middle East."

It always comes to this eventually. "There's no way of knowing exactly...," I begin.

"Six million Jews in Europe."

I coil myself. I know when I'm beaten.

"One point seven million Cambodians in Asia."

"What are you planting?" I say.

She reaches into the horsehide pouch slung from her hip. Three brown tubers bump against one another as the muscles in her hand work. "Maybe choke." She grins. "Maybe potato. What do *you* think?"

That's the thing about the innocents. Everyone's opinion gets heard and considered carefully. Even mine. They talk among themselves, negotiate, come to consensus. Might take them ten minutes, might take a month. They're as patient as trees. They never bicker or get angry. Nobody hold grudges. I've never seen any of them throw a punch. Oh, and they're the most polite drunks in history, although the cloudy brew they make from stale bread mash is so vile that I don't know how they can bear it. Since nothing important ever happens in the garden, they have no history. Instead they have seasons — planting and harvest. Birth and death. They're dull as dirt. That's why they're so fascinated by you. You burn with unholy fire, my children.

You *are* mine, by the way. Maybe the Gardener created you, but *I* made you think for the first time. I've been fascinated by what you've accomplished since — the sublime and the monstrous. I take no credit, and accept no blame. I just gave you that little push. Of course, your book claims that I'm evil. Why? Because I pointed you toward the Tree of Knowledge? Remember what Socrates said? The unexamined life is not worth living.

I laughed when the Gardener squeezed dust again and came up with these simple creatures. Me, I would have torn up the garden. But I'll admit I was confused at first. What was the Gardener thinking? Of course, He

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doesn't share His plan with the likes of me. Hey, I'm not even sure the Gardener exists. I infer that this is the case, but the Gardener has never bothered manifesting in my corner of the garden. For that matter, I've never seen angels either, although the innocents talk of them all the time. But why didn't the Gardener just cancel out your Original So-Called Sin? Press the undo key? It took me a while to figure this out.

You see, reality is a cage. I'm in it. So are you, Vladimir Putin, Joyce Carol Oates, your aunt Sophie, Skipping-Uphill-With-Delight and the Archangel Uriel. But here's the kicker: the Gardener must be trapped in our cage too. He's not bigger than our cage, nor did He make it. The Gardener can't exceed the speed of light or divide by zero. He didn't set off the Big Bang or charm the quarks. The Gardener is not almighty. He might be powerful enough to create you and me, powerful enough sweep all of you away like ants off a picnic table. But there must be limits to what He can do.

I know this is so because I still exist. I plucked you when you were ripe, and I'm doing my best to harvest this latest crop from under His Nose. If It exists, *if He exists*. So what if He has trapped me here and makes me slither on my belly and shed my skin and eat toads? These are very weak plays, in my opinion. Not worthy of a being who is truly supreme.

So I'm tempting Perched-On-The-Edge-Of-The-Sky, who is harvesting persimmons just outside the little village of West Lawn. She has brought her baby to the orchard with her. It's asleep in a basket in the shade, swaddled in a koala blanket. A cute little thing with silver down and a hook nose. I start Perched-On-The-Edge-Of-The-Sky with a joke.

This guy's car breaks down in the desert, twenty miles from the nearest town, and as he's walking through the heat of the day, he prays to God for help.

God hears him and says, "Because you believe in Me, I will grant you whatever you wish."

The man says, "Well, I could really use a new car. How about a Silver Porsche Boxster with the 2.7 liter engine!"

This pisses God off. "Such a materialistic wish! Think again and ask for something that will bring peace to your immortal soul and give honor and glory to Me."

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The man is ashamed. He looks deep into his heart and then says, "Oh God, there is a reason why I've been stranded here in this desert. I've been married and divorced six times and now I've lost everything except twenty-seven dollars and a crummy '89 Ford Escort. My wives all complained that I never met their emotional needs, that I was selfish and insensitive. What I wish is to understand women. I want to be able to read their feelings, anticipate their thoughts, satisfy their every desire. I want to make some woman truly happy."

There is a long silence. Then God says, "So, you want the standard or the automatic?"

"That's funny." Perched-On-The-Edge-Of-The-Sky smiles as she leans her ladder against the next tree. The orchard is filled with the tart fragrance of ripe persimmon. "I'm glad we have no men here."

"Men are trouble," I agree.

She climbs two rungs then pauses, as if distracted.

"What?" I say.

"The angels say I shouldn't listen to you make jokes about the Gardener."

"They would." I'm both pleased and annoyed to have drawn them out. "What does the Gardener say?"

She sniffs and continues up the ladder. "The Gardener doesn't talk to me."

"The Gardener doesn't talk to anyone. That's the best part of the joke." I wrap myself around the trunk of the tree and start climbing after her. "How do you even know there is a Gardener?"

"The angels tell me."

"You see angels?"

She plucks a fruit the color of hot coals off the branch. "Not exactly see."

I've had this conversation with many of the other innocents. I'm almost tempted to say her lines for her, get to the crunch.

"You see them now?" I say. "How many?"

She shows me three fingers.

"They like to travel in packs. What are they saying? What words do they use?"

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She crooks her left arm around the ladder's rail and reaches with her right. "They don't speak in words." The dried calyx of the persimmon looks like a hat, the fruit like a blank red face.

"They show you things?"

She nods. The tip of her tongue pokes between her flat teeth.

"Like in a dream?" I crawl onto the branch she is working.

"Just like." She twists another persimmon free.

"But not as real as a bite of ripe fruit. Or the square, scaly bark of this tree. Or the cry of your baby."

She glances down. "My baby's not crying."

"Do you know what the angels are going to do to them? Really?"

The down on her neck ruffles. She says nothing.

"The book says that the Sun will turn black as sackcloth of hair, and the Moon will become as blood."

"They're wicked," she says.

"They are," I agree. And then I hit her with another joke: Revelation, Chapter 14.

And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the Earth is ripe. And the angel thrust in his sickle into the Earth, and gathered the vine of the Earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress ...

"Stop," she says. Her voice is like a hammer striking a stone.

"All right." The innocents have spilled the blood of all the animals, giraffes and moose and baboons and anteaters and voles, but they have never killed one another. And although they despise your works, they recognize that you think and feel, that you dance under the Sun and dream under the stars. As they do. When they use the imagination the Gardener gave them, His plan to exterminate you makes them very, *very* queasy. "Besides, it'll probably never happen."

"Why do you say that?"

Below us, the baby is stirring. It makes moist sounds, like mud sucking at a sandal.

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"Well, it just doesn't seem fair to you." As I let her mull that over, my tongue flicks out. I can't help it — that's the way we serpents smell. We sample the air with our forked tongues and then thrust the two tips into the vomeronasal recesses organs in our palates. Perched-On-The-Edge-Of-The-Sky smells of stale sheets and night sweat; she's one of the ones who has already begun to think. "I mean, after the angels kill them all, the Gardener will expect you to leave the garden and go into the world. Take their place."

"Yes."

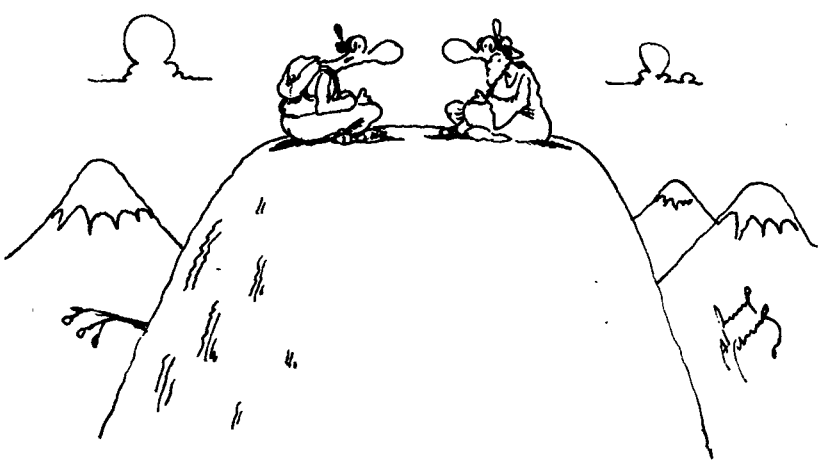
"But why would you want to do that?"

Her jaw muscles work but she says nothing.

"What are the angels telling you now?" I ask.

She blinks; I think she would cry if she could. "That I must have faith."

"Ah, faith." So the seed is sown. Take heart, my children. I may yet bring in this new harvest. ☙



"I want to understand a lot, but not so much that I realize how little I actually know."

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Peter S. Beagle is, of course, the author of A Fine and Private Place *and* The Last Unicorn. *His last appearance in our pages was a lifetime ago, when we reprinted "Come, Lady Death" in our Aug. 1966 issue. His recent projects are too numerous to list (go to* www.peterbeagle.com *for a full account of them) but they include receipt of France's Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire for* The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche, *a forthcoming children's book to be illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon, a new audiobook of* The Last Unicorn *(read by Mr. Beagle), and he's currently working on a novel entitled* Summerlong.

Mr. Beagle's new story will strike some familiar chords with those of you who have read Giant Bones *or* The Innkeeper's Song, *but you needn't have read either of those books in order to enjoy this chase.*

Quarry

By Peter S. Beagle

I NEVER WENT BACK TO MY room that night. I knew I had an hour at most before they would have guards on the door. What was on my back, at my belt, and in my pockets was all I took — that, and all the *tilgit* the cook could scrape together and cram into my pouch. We had been friends since the day I arrived at *that place*, a scrawny, stubborn child, ready to die rather than ever admit my terror and my pain. "So," she said, as I burst into her kitchen, "Running you came to me, twenty years gone, blood all over you, and running you leave. Tell me nothing, just drink this." I have no idea what was in that bottle she fetched from under her skirts and made me empty on the spot, but it kept me warm on my way all that night, and the *tilgit* — disgusting dried marshweed as it is — lasted me three days.

Looking back, I shiver to think how little I understood, not only the peril I was in, but the true extent of the power I fled. I did know better than to make for Sumildene, where a stranger stands out like a sailor in a convent; but if I had had the brains of a bedbug, I'd never have tried to cut through the marshes toward the Queen's Road. In the first place, that

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grand highway is laced with tollbridges, manned by toll-collectors, every four or five miles; in the second, the Queen's Road is so well-banked and pruned and well-maintained that should you be caught out there by daylight, there's no cover, nowhere to run — no rutted smuggler's alley to duck into, not so much as a proper tree to climb. But I didn't know that then, among other things.

What I did understand, beyond doubt, was that they could not afford to let me leave. I do not say *escape*, because they would never have thought of it in such a way. To their minds, they had offered me their greatest honor, never before granted one so young, and I had not only rejected it, but lied in their clever, clever faces, accepting so humbly, falteringly telling them again and again of my bewildered gratitude, unworthy peasant that I was. And even then I did know that they were not deceived for a single moment, and they knew I knew, and blessed me, one after the other, to let me know. I dream that twilight chamber still — the tall chairs, the cold stone table, the tiny green *tintan* birds murmuring themselves to sleep in the vines outside the window, those smiling, wise, gentle eyes on me — and each time I wake between sweated sheets, my mouth wrenched with pleas for my life. Old as I am, and still.

If I were to leave, and it became known that I had done so, and without any retribution, others would go too, in time. Not very many — there were as yet only a few who shared my disquiet and my growing suspicions — but even one unpunished deserter was more than they could afford to tolerate.

I had no doubt at all that they would grieve my death. They were not unkind people, for monsters.

The cook hid me in the scullery, covering me with aprons and dishrags. It was not yet full dark when I left, but she felt it risky for me to wait longer. When we said farewell, she shoved one of her paring knives into my belt, gave me a swift, light buffet on the ear, said, "So. On your way then," pushed me out of a hidden half-door into the dusk, and slapped it shut behind me. I felt lonelier in that moment, blinking around me with the crickets chirping and the breeze turning chill, and that great house filling half the evening sky, than I ever have again.

As I say, I made straight for the marshes, not only meaning to strike the Queen's Road, but confident that the boggy ground would hide my

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footprints. It might indeed have concealed them from the eyes of ordinary trackers, but not from those who were after me within another hour. I knew little of them, the Hunters, though over twenty years I had occasionally heard this whisper or that behind this or that slightly trembling hand. Just once, not long after I came to *that place*, I was sent to the woods to gather kindling, and there I did glimpse two small brown-clad persons in a tree. They must have seen me, but they moved neither foot or finger, nor turned their heads, but kept sitting there like a pair of dull brown birds, half-curled, half-crouched, gazing back toward the great house, waiting for something, waiting for someone. I never saw them again, nor any like them; not until they came for me.

Not those two, of course — or maybe they were the same ones; it is hard to be sure of any Hunter's age or face or identity. For all I know, they do not truly exist most of the time, but bide in their nowhere until *that place* summons them into being to pursue some runaway like me. What I do know, better than most, is that they never give up. You have to kill them.

I had killed once before — in my ignorance, I supposed the cook was the only one who knew — but I had no skill in it, and no weapon with me but the cook's little knife: nothing to daunt those who now followed. I knew the small start I had was meaningless, and I went plunging through the marshes, increasingly indifferent to how much noise I made, or to the animals and undergrowth I disturbed. Strong I was, yes, and swift enough, but also brainless with panic and hamstrung by inexperience. A child could have tracked me, let alone a Hunter.

That I was not taken that first night had nothing to do with any craft or wiliness of mine. What happened was that I slipped on a straggling *tilgit* frond (wild, the stuff is as slimy-slick as any snail-road), took a shattering tumble down a slope I never saw, and finished by cracking my head open against a mossy, jagged rock. Amazingly, I did not lose consciousness then, but managed to crawl off into a sort of shallow half-burrow at the base of the hill. There I scraped every bit of rotting vegetation within reach over myself, having a dazed notion of smothering my scent. I vaguely recall packing handfuls of leaves and spiderwebs against my bleeding wound, and making some sort of effort to cover the betraying stains, before I fainted away.

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I woke in the late afternoon of the next day, frantically hungry, but so weak and sick that I could not manage so much as a mouthful of the *tilgit*. The bleeding had stopped — though I dared not remove my ragged, mushy poultice for another full day — and after a time I was able to stand up and stay on my feet, just barely. I lurched from my earthen shroud and stood for some while, lightheaded yet, but steadily more lucid, sniffing and staring for any sign of my shadows. Not that I was in the best shape to spy them out — giddy as I was, they could likely have walked straight up to me and disemboweled me with their empty hands, as they can do. But they were nowhere to be seen or sensed.

I drank from a mucky trickle I found slipping by under the leaves, then grubbed my way back into my poor nest again and slept until nightfall. For all my panicky blundering, I knew by the stars that I was headed in the general direction of the Queen's Road, which I continued to believe meant sanctuary and the start of my new and blessedly ordinary life among ordinary folk.

I covered more distance than I expected that night, for all my lingering faintness and my new prudence, trying now to make as little noise as possible, and leave as little trace of my passage. I met no one, and when I went to ground at dawn in a riverbank cave — some *sheknath*'s winter lair, by the smell of it — there was still no more indication of anyone trailing me than there had been since I began my flight. But I was not fool enough to suppose myself clear of pursuit, not quite. I merely hoped, which was just as bad.

The Queen's Road was farther away than I had supposed: for all the terrible and tempting knowledge that I and others like me acquired in *that place*, practical geography was unheard of. I kept moving, trailing after the hard stars through the marshes as intently as the Hunters were surely trailing me. More than once, the bog sucked both shoes off my feet, taking them down so deeply that I would waste a good half-hour fishing for them; again and again, a sudden screen of burly *jukli* vines or some sticky nameless creepers barred my passage, so I must either lower my head and bull on through, or else blunder somehow around the obstacle and pray not to lose the way, which I most often did.

Nearing dawn of the fourth day, I heard the rumble of cartwheels, like a faraway storm, and the piercing squawk, unmistakable, of their *pashidi*

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drivers' clan-whistles along with them, and realized that I was nearing the Queen's Road.

If the Hunters were following as closely as I feared, was this to be the end of the game — were they poised to cut me down as I raced wildly, recklessly, toward imaginary safety? Did they expect me to abandon all caution and charge forward into daylight and the open, whooping with joy and triumph? They had excellent reason to do so, as idiotic a target as I must have made for them a dozen times over. But even idiots — even terrified young idiots — may learn one or two things in four days of being pursued through a quagmire by silent, invisible hounds. I waited that day out under a leech-bush: few trackers will ever investigate one of those closely; and if you lie *very* still, there is a fairish chance that the serrated, brittle-seeming leaves will not come seeking your blood. At moonset I started on.

Just as the ground began to feel somewhat more solid, just as the first lights of the Queen's Road began to glimmer through the thinning vegetation...there they were, there they were, both of them, each standing away at an angle, making me the third point of a murderous triangle. They simply *appeared* — can you understand? — assembling themselves out of the marsh dawn: weaponless both, their arms hanging at their sides, loose and unthreatening. One was smiling; one was not — there was no other way to tell them apart. In the dimness, I saw laughter in their eyes, and a weariness such as even I have never imagined, and death.

They let me by. They turned their backs to me and let me pass, fading so completely into the gray sunrise that I was almost willing to believe them visions, savage mirages born of my own fear and exhaustion. But with that combination came a weary understanding of my own. They were playing with me, taking pleasure in allowing me to run loose for a bit, but letting me know that whenever they tired of the game I was theirs, in the dark marshes or on the wide white highway, and not a thing I could do about it. At my age, I am entitled to forget what I forget — terror and triumph alike, grief and the wildest joy alike — and so I have, and well rid of every one of them I am. But that instant, that particular recognition, remains indelible. Some memories do come to live with you for good and all, like wives or husbands.

I went forward. There was nothing else to do. The marshes fell away

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around me, rapidly giving place to nondescript country, half-ragged, halfway domesticated to give a sort of shoulder to the road. Farmers were already opening their fruit and vegetable stands along that border; merchants' boys from towns farther along were bawling their employers' wares to the carters and wagoners; and as I stumbled up, a *shukri*-trainer passed in front of me, holding his arms out, like a scarecrow, for folk to see his sharp-toothed pets scurrying up and down his body, and more of them pouring from each pocket as he strode along. Ragged, scabbed and filthy as I was, not one traveler turned his head as I slipped onto the Queen's Road.

On the one hand, I blessed their unconcern; on the other, that same indifference told me clearly that none of them would raise a finger if they saw me taken, snatched back before their eyes to *that place* and whatever doom might await me there. Only the collectors at their tollgates might be at all likely to mourn the fate of a potential contributor — and I had nothing for them anyway, which was going to be another problem in a couple of miles. But right then was problem enough for me: friendless on a strange road, utterly vulnerable, utterly without resources, flying — well, trudging — from the only home I had known since the age of nine, and from the small, satisfied assassins it had sent after me. And out of *tilgit* as well.

The Queen's Road runs straight all the way from Bitava to Fors na' Shachim, but in those days there was a curious sort of elbow: unleveled, anciently furrowed, a last untamed remnant of the original wagon-road, beginning just before the first tollgate I was to reach. I could see it from a good distance, and made up my mind to dodge away onto it — without any notion of where the path might come out, but with some mad fancy of at once eluding both the killers and the collectors. Sometimes, in those nights when the dreams and memories I cannot always tell apart anymore keep me awake, I try to imagine what my life would have been if I had actually carried my plan through. Different, most likely. Shorter, surely.

Even this early, the road was steadily growing more crowded with traffic, wheeled and afoot, slowing my pace to that of my closest neighbor — which, in this case, happened to be a bullock-cart loaded higher than my head with *jejebhai* manure. Absolutely the only thing the creatures are

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good for; we had a pair on the farm where I was a boy — if I ever was, if any of that ever happened. Ignoring the smell, I kept as close to the cart as I could, hoping that it would hide me from the toll-collectors' sight when I struck off onto that odd little bend. My legs were tensing for the first swift, desperate stride, when I heard the voice at my ear, saying only one word, "*No.*"

A slightly muffled voice, but distinctive — there was a sharpness to it, and a hint of a strange cold amusement, all in a single word. I whirled, saw nothing but the manure cart, determined that I had misheard a driver's grunt, or even a wheel-squeak, and set myself a second time to make my move.

Once again the voice, more insistent now, almost a bark: "*No*, fool!"

It was not the driver; he never looked at me. I was being addressed — commanded — by the manure pile.

It shifted slightly as I gaped, and I saw the eyes then. They were gray and very bright, with a suggestion of pale yellow far under the grayness. All I could make out of the face in which they were set was a thick white mustache below and brows nearly as heavy above. The man — for it was a human face, I was practically sure — was burrowed as deeply into the *jejebhai* dung as though he were lolling under the most luxurious of quilts and bolsters on a winter's night. He beckoned me to join him.

I stopped where I was, letting the cart jolt past me. The sharp voice from the manure was clearer this time, and that much more annoyed with me. "Boy, if you have any visions of a life beyond the next five minutes, you will do as I tell you. *Now*." The last word was no louder than the others, but it brought me scrambling into that cartload of muck faster than ever I have since lunged into a warm bed, with a woman waiting. The man made room for me with a low, harsh chuckle.

"Lie still, so," he told me. "Lie still, make no smallest row, and we will pass the gate like royalty. And those who follow will watch you pass, and never take your scent. Thank me later —" I had opened my mouth to speak, but he put a rough palm over it, shaking his white head. "Down, down," he whispered, and to my disgust he pushed himself even farther into the manure pile, all but vanishing into the darkness and the stench. And I did the same.

He saved my life, in every likelihood, for we left that gate and half a

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dozen like it behind as we continued our malodorous excursion, while the driver, all unwitting, paid our toll each time. Only with the last barrier safely past did we slide from the cart, tumble to the roadside and such cover as there was, and rise to face each other in daylight. We reeked beyond the telling of it — in honesty, almost beyond the smelling of it, so inured to the odor had our nostrils become. We stank beyond anything but laughter, and that was what we did then, grimacing and howling and falling down on the dry grass, pointing helplessly at each other and going off again into great, ridiculous whoops of mirth and relief, until we wore ourselves out and could barely breathe, let alone laugh. The old man's laughter was as shrill and cold as the mating cries of *shukris*, but it was laughter even so.

He was old indeed, now I saw him in daylight, even under a crust of filth and all that still stuck to the filth — straw, twigs, dead spiders, bullock-hair. His own hair and brows were as white as his mustache, and the gray eyes streaked with rheum; yet his cheeks were absurdly pink, like a young girl's cheeks, and he carried himself as straight as any young man. Young as I was myself, and unwise as I was, when I first looked into his eyes, I already knew far better than to trust him. And nonetheless, knowing, I wanted to. He can do that.

"I think we bathe," he said to me. "Before anything else, I do think we bathe."

"I think so too," I said. "Yes." He jerked his white head, and we walked away from the Queen's Road, off back into the wild woods.

"I am Soukyan," I offered, but to that he made no response. He clearly knew the country, for he led me directly to a fast-flowing stream, and then to a pool lower down, where the water gathered and swirled. We cleaned ourselves there, though it took us a long time, so mucky we were; and afterward, naked-new as raw carrots, we lay in the Sun and talked for a while. I told truth, for the most part, leaving out only some minor details of *that place* — things I had good reason not to think about just then — and he...ah, well, what he told me of his life, of how he came to hail me from that dungheap, was such a stew of lies and the odd honesty that I've never studied out the right of it yet, no more than I have ever learned his own name. The truth is not in him, and I would be dearly disappointed if it should show its poor face now. He was there — leave it at that. He was

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there at the particular moment when I needed a friend, however fraudulent. It has happened so since.

"So," he said at last, stretching himself in the Sun. "And what's to be done with you now?" — for all the world as though he had all the disposing of me and my future. "If you fancy that your followers have forsaken you, merely because we once stank our way past them, I'd greatly enjoy to have the writing of your will. They will run behind you until you die — they will never return to their masters without you, or whatever's left of you. On that you have my word."

"I know that well enough," said I, trying my best to appear as knowledgeable as he. "But perhaps I am not to be taken so easily." The old man snorted with as much contempt as I have ever heard in a single exhalation of breath, and rolled to his feet, deceptively, alarmingly graceful. He crouched naked on his haunches, facing me, studying me, smiling with pointed teeth.

"Without me, you die," he said, quite quietly. "You know it and I know it. Say it back to me." I only stared, and he snapped, "*Say it back.* Without me?"

And I said it, because I knew it was true. "Without you, I would be dead." The old man nodded approvingly. The yellow glint was stronger in the gray eyes.

"Now," he said. "I have my own purposes, my own small annoyance to manage. I could deal with it myself, as I've done many a time — never think otherwise — but it suits me to share roads with you for a little. It suits me." He was studying me as closely as I have ever been considered, even by those at *that place*, and I could not guess what he saw. "It suits me," he said for a third time. "We may yet prove of some use to each other."

"We may, or we may not," I said, more than a bit sharply, for I was annoyed at the condescension in his glance. "I may seem a gormless boy to you, but I know this country, and I know how to handle myself." The first claim was a lie; of the second, all I can say is that I believed it then. I went on, probably more belligerent for my fear: "Indeed, I may well owe you my life, and I will repay you as I can, my word on it. But as to whether we should ally ourselves...sir, I hope only to put the width of the world between myself and those who seek me — I have no plans beyond that. Of

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what your own plans, your own desires may be, you will have to inform me, for I have no notion at all."

He seemed to approve my boldness; at any rate, he laughed that short, yapping laugh of his and said, "For the moment, my plans run with yours. We're dried enough — dress yourself, so, and we'll be off and gone while our little friends are still puzzling over how we could have slipped their grasp. They'll riddle it out quickly enough, but we'll have the heels of them a while yet." And I could not help finding comfort in noticing that "your followers" had now become "our little friends."

So we ourselves were allies of a sort, united by common interests, whatever they were. Having no goal, nor any vision of a life beyond flight, I had no real choice but to go where he led, since on my own the only question would have been whether I should be caught before I stumbled into a swamp and got eaten by a *lourijakh*. For all his age, he marched along with an air of absolute serenity, no matter if we were beating our way through some near-impenetrable thornwood or crossing high barrens in the deepest night. Wherever he was bound — which was only one of the things he did not share with me — we encountered few other travelers on our way to it. An old lone wizard making his *lamisetha*; a couple of deserters from someone's army, who wanted to sell us their uniforms; a little band of prospectors, too busy quarreling over the exact location of a legendary hidden *drast* mine to pay overmuch attention to us. I think there was a water witch as well, but at this reach it is hard to be entirely sure.

By now I would not have trusted my woodcraft for half a minute, but it was obvious from our first day together that my new friend had enough of that for the pair of us. Every night, before we slept — turn and turn about, always one on watch — and every morning, before anything at all, he prowled the area in a wide, constantly shifting radius, clearly going by his nose as much as his sight and hearing. Most of the time he was out of my view, but on occasion I would hear a kind of whuffling snort, usually followed by a low, disdainful grunt. In his own time he'd come trotting jauntily up from the brushy hollow or the dry ravine, shaking his dusty white hair in the moonlight, to say, "Two weeks, near enough, and not up with us yet? Not taking advantage of my years and your inexperience to pounce on us in the dark hours and pull us apart like a couple of boiled

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chickens? Indeed, I begin to lose respect for our legendary entourage — as stupid as the rest, they are, after all." And what he meant by *the rest*, I could not imagine then.

Respect the Hunters or no, he never slackened our pace, nor ever grew careless in covering our tracks. We were angling eastward, into the first folds of the Skagats — the Burnt Hills, your people call them, I believe. At the time I had no name at all for them, nor for any other feature of this new landscape. For all the teachings I had absorbed at *that place*, for all the sly secret knowledge that was the true foundation of the great house, for all the wicked wisdom that I would shed even today, if I could, as a snake scours itself free of its skin against a stone...nevertheless, then I knew next to nothing of the actual world in which that knowledge moved. We were deliberately kept quite ignorant, you see, in certain ways.

He ridiculed me constantly about that. I see him still, cross-legged across the night's fire from me, jabbing out with a long-nailed forefinger, demanding, "And you mean to sit there and tell me that you've never heard of the Mildasi people, or the Achali? You know the lineage, the lovers and the true fate of every queen who ever ruled in Fors — you know the deep cause of the Fishermen's Rebellion, and what really came of it — you know the entire history of the Old Arrangement, which cannot be written — but you have absolutely no inkling where Byrnarik Bay's to be found, nor the Northern Barrens, nor can you so much as guess at the course of the Susathi. Well, you've had such an education as never was, that's all I can say. And it's worthless to us, all of it worthless, nothing but a waste of head-space, taking up room that could have been better occupied if you'd been taught to read track, steal a horse, or shoot a bow. *Worthless.*"

"I can shoot a bow," I told him once. "My father taught me."

"Oh, indeed? I must remember to stand behind you when you loose off." There was a deal more of that as we journeyed on. I found it tedious most often, and sometimes hurtful; but there was a benefit, too, because he began taking it on himself to instruct me in the nature and fabric of this new world — and this new life, as well — as though I were visiting from the most foreign of far-off lands. Which, in ways even he could not have known, I was.

One thing I did understand from the first day was that he was plainly

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a fugitive himself, no whit different from me, for all his conceit. Why else would he have been hiding in a dung-cart, eager to commandeer the company of such a bumpkin as I? Kindly concern for my survival in a dangerous world might be part of it, but he was hardly combing our backtrail every night on my behalf. I knew that much from the way he slept — when he slept — most often on his back, his arms and legs curled close and scrabbling in the air, running and running behind his closed eyes, just as a hound will do. I knew it from the way he would cry out, not in any tongue I knew, but in strange yelps and whimpers and near-growls that seemed sometimes to border on language, so close to real words that I was sure I almost caught them, and that if he only kept on a bit longer, or if I dared bend a bit closer, I'd understand who — or what — was pursuing him through his dreams. Once he woke, and saw me there, studying him; and though his entire body tensed like a crossbow, he never moved. The gray eyes had gone full yellow, the pupils slitted almost to invisibility. They held me until he closed them again, and I crept away to my blanket. In the morning, he made no mention of my spying on his sleep, but I never imagined that he had forgotten.

So young I was then, all that way back, and so much I knew, and he was quite right — none of it was to prove the smallest use in the world I entered on our journey. That nameless, tireless, endlessly scornful old man showed me the way to prepare and cook *aidallah*, which looks like a dungball itself, which is more nourishing than *tilgit*, and tastes far better, and which is poisonous if you don't strip every last bit of the inner rind. He taught me to carry my silly little knife out of sight in a secret place; he taught me how to sense a *sheknath*'s presence a good mile before winding it, and — when we were sneaking through green, steamy Taritaja country — how to avoid the mantraps those cannibal folk set for travelers. (I was on my way over the lip of two of them before he snatched me back, dancing with scorn, laughing his yap-laugh and informing me that no one would ever eat *my* brain to gain wisdom.) And, in spite of all my efforts, I cannot imagine forgetting my first introduction to the sandslugs of the Oriskany plains. There isn't a wound they can't clean out, nor an infection they can't digest; but it is not a comfortable process, and I prefer not to speak of it any further. Nevertheless, more than once I have come a very long way to find them again.

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But cunning and knowing as that old man was, even he could detect no sign of the Hunters from the moment when we joined fortunes on the Queen's Road. Today I'd have the wit to be frightened more every day by their absence; but then I was for once too interested in puzzling out the cause of my companion's night terrors, and the identity of his pursuers to be much concerned with my own. And on the twentieth twilight that we shared, dropping down from the Skagats into high desert country, I finally caught sight of it for a single instant: the cause.

It stalked out of a light evening haze on long bird legs — three of them. The third appeared to be more tail than leg — the creature leaned back on it briefly, regarding us — but it definitely had long toes or claws of its own. As for the head and upper body; I had only a dazed impression of something approaching the human, and more fearsome for that. In another moment, it was gone, soundless for all its size; and the old man was up out of a doze, teeth bared, crouching to launch himself in any direction. When he turned to me, I'd no idea whether I should have seen what I had, or whether it would be wisest to feign distraction. But he never gave me the chance to choose.

I cannot say that I actually saw the change. I never do, not really. Never any more than a sort of sway in the air — you could not even call it a ripple — and there he is: there, like that first time: red-brown mask, the body a deeper red, throat and chest and tail-tip white-gold, bright yellow eyes seeing me — *me*, lost young Soukyan, always the same — seeing me truly and terribly, all the way down. Always. The fox.

One wild glare before he sprang away into the mist, and I did not see him again for a day and another night. Nor the great bird-legged thing either, though I sat up both nights, expecting its return. It was plainly seeking him, not me — whatever it might be, it was no Hunter — but what if it saw me as his partner, his henchman, as liable as he for whatever wrong it might be avenging? And what if I *had* become a shapeshifter's partner, unaware? Not all alliances are written, or spoken, or signed. Oh, I had no trouble staying awake those two nights. I thought it quite likely that I might never sleep again.

Or eat again, either, come to that. As I have told you, I never went back to my room at *that place*, which meant leaving my bow there. I wished now that I had chanced fetching it: not only because I had killed a man with that bow when I was barely tall enough to aim and draw, but because

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without it, on my own, I was bound to go very hungry indeed. I stayed close to our camp — what point in wandering off into unknown country in search of a half-mad, half-sinister old man? — and merely waited, making do with such scraps and stores as we had, drinking from a nearby waterhole, little more than a muddy footprint. Once, in that second night, something large and silent crossed the Moon; but when I challenged it there was no response, and nothing to see. I sat down again and threw more wood on my fire.

He came back in human form, almost out of nowhere, but not quite — I never saw that change, either, but I did see, far behind him, coming around a thicket beyond the waterhole, the two sets of footprints, man and animal, and the exact place where one supplanted the other. Plainly, he did not care whether I saw it or not. He sat down across from me, as always, took a quick glance at our depleted larder, and said irritably, "You ate every last one of the *sushal* eggs. Greedy."

"Yes. I did." Formal, careful, both of us, just as though we had never shared a dung-cart. We stared at each other in silence for some while, and then I asked him, most politely, "What are you?"

"What I need to be," he answered. "Now this, now that, as necessary. As are we all."

I was surprised by my own sudden fury at his blandly philosophical air. "We do not *all* turn into foxes," I said. "We do not *all* abandon our friends — " I remember that I hesitated over the word, but then came out with it strongly — "leaving them to face monsters alone. Nor do we *all* lie to them from sunup to sundown, as you have done to me. I have no use for you, and we have no future together. Come tomorrow, I go alone."

"Well, now, that would be an extremely foolish mistake, and most probably fatal as well." He was as calmly judicial as any human could have been, but he was *not* human, *not* human. He said, "Consider — did I not keep you from your enemies, when they were as close on your heels as your own dirty skin? Have I not counseled you well during this journey you and I have made together? That *monster*, as you call it, did you no harm — nor even properly frighted you, am I right? Say honestly." I had no fitting answer, though I opened my mouth half a dozen times, while he sat there and smiled at me. "So. Now. Sit still, and I will tell you everything you wish to know."

Which, of course, he did not.

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This is what he did tell me:

"What you saw — that was no monster, but something far worse. That was a Goro." He waited only a moment for me to show that I knew the name; quite rightly not expecting this, he went on. "The Goro are the bravest, fiercest folk who walk the Earth. To be killed by a Goro is considered a great honor, for they deign to slay only the bravest and fiercest of their enemies — merely to make an enemy of a Goro is an honor as well. However short-lived."

"Which is what you have done," I said, when he paused. He looked not at all guilty or ashamed, but distinctly embarrassed.

"You could say that, I suppose," he replied. "In a way. It was a mistake — I made a serious mistake, and I'm not too proud to admit it, even to you." I had never heard him sound as he did then: half-defiant, yet very nearly mumbling, like a child caught out in a lie. He said, "I stole a Goro's dream."

I looked at him. I did not laugh — I don't recall that I said anything — but he sneered at me anyway. His eyes were entirely gray now, narrow with disdain, and somewhat more angled than I had noticed before. "Mock me, then — why should you not? Your notion of dreams will have them all gossamer, all insubstantial film and gauze and wispy vapors. I tell you now that the dream of a Goro is as real and solid as your imbecile self, and each one takes solid form in our world, no matter if we recognize it or not for what it is. Understand me, fool!" He had grown notably heated, and there was a long silence between us before he spoke again.

"Understand me. Your life may well depend on it." For just that moment, the eyes were almost pleading. "It happened that I was among the Goro some time ago, traveling in...that *shape* you have seen." In all the time that we have known each other, he has never spoken the word *fox*, not to me. He said, "A Goro's dream, once dreamed, will manifest itself to us as it chooses — a grassblade or a jewel, a weed or a log of wood, who knows why? In my case...in my case — pure chance, mind you — it turned out to be a shiny stone. The *shape* likes shiny things." His voice trailed away, again a guilty child's voice.

"So you took it," I said. "Blame the shape, if you like — no matter to me — but it was you did the stealing. I may be only a fool, but I can follow you that far."

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"It is not so simple!" he began angrily, but he caught himself then, and went on more calmly. "Well, well, your morality's no matter to me either. What should matter to you is that a stolen dream cries out to its begetter. No Goro will ever rest until his dream is safe home again, and the thief gathered to his ancestors in very small pieces. Most often, some of the pieces are lacking." He smiled at me.

"A grassblade?" I demanded. "A stone — a stick of wood? To pursue and kill for a discarded stick, no use to anyone? You neglected to mention that your brave, fierce Goro are also quite mad."

The old man sighed, a long and elaborately despairing sigh. "They are no more mad than yourself — a good deal less so, more than likely. And a Goro's dream is of considerable use — to a Goro, no one else. They keep them all, can you follow *that*? A Goro will hoard every physical manifestation of every dream he dreams in his life, even if at the end it seems only to amount to a heap of dead twigs and dried flower petals. Because he is bound to present the whole unsightly clutter to his gods, when he goes to them. And if even one is missing — one single feather, candle-end, teacup, seashell fragment — then the Goro will suffer bitterly after death. So they believe, and they take poorly to having it named nonsense. Which I am very nearly sure it is."

When he was not railing directly at me, his arrogance trickled away swiftly, leaving him plainly uneasy, shapeshifter or no. I found this rather shamefully enjoyable. I said, "So. This one wants his shiny stone back, and it has called him all this way on your trail. It does seem to me —"

"That I might simply return it to him? Apologies — some small token gift, perhaps — and no harm done?" This time his short laugh sounded like a branch snapping in a storm. "Indeed, nothing would suit me better. It is only a useless pebble, as you say — the *shape* lost all interest in it long ago. Unfortunately, for such an offense against a Goro — such a sin, if you like — vengeance is required." Speaking those words silenced him again for a long moment: his eyes flicked constantly past and beyond me, and his whole body had grown so taut that I half-expected him to turn back into a fox as we sat together. For the first time in our acquaintance, I pitied him.

"Vengeance is required," he repeated presently. "It is a true sacrament among the Goro, much more than a matter of settling tribal scores.

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Something to do with evening all things out, restoring the proper balance of the world. Smoothing the rumples, you might say. Very philosophical, the Goro, when they have a moment." He was doing his best to appear composed, you see, though he must have known I knew better. He does that.

"All as may be," I said. "What's clear to me is that we now have two different sets of assassins to deal with, each lot unstoppable —"

"The Goro are *not* assassins," he interrupted me. "They are a civilized and honorable people, according to their lights." He was genuinely indignant.

"Splendid," I said. "Then by all means, you must stay where you are and allow yourself to be honorably slaughtered, so as to right the balance of things. For myself, I'll give them a run, in any case," and I was on my feet and groping for my belongings. Wonderful, what weeks of flight can do for a naturally mild temper.

He rose with me, nodding warningly, if such a thing can be. "Aye, we'd best be moving. I can't speak for your lot, but the day's coming on hot, and our Goro will sleep out the worst of it, if I know them at all. Pack and follow."

That brusquely—*pack and follow*. And so I did, for there was no more choice in the matter than there ever had been. The old man set a fierce pace that day, not only demanding greater speed from me than ever, but also doubling back, zigzagging like a hare with a *shukri* one jump behind; then inexplicably going to ground for half an hour at a time, absolutely motionless and silent until we abruptly started on again, with no more explanation than before. During those stretches he often slipped out of sight, each time hissing me to stillness, and I knew that he would take the fox-shape (or would it take him? which was real?) to scout back along the way we had come. But whether we were a trifle safer, or whether death was a little closer on our heels, I could never be sure. He never once said.

The country continued high desert, simmering with mirages, but there were moments in the ever-colder nights when I could smell fresh water; or perhaps I felt its presence in the water composing my own body. The old man did finally reveal that in less than a week, at our current rate, we should strike the Nai, the greatest river in this part of the country, which actually begins in the Skagats. There are always boats, he assured

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me — scows and barges and little schooners, going up and down with dried fish for this settlement, nails and harness for that one, a full load of lumber for the new town building back of the old port. Paying passengers were quite common on the Nai, as well as the non-paying sort — and here he winked elaborately at me, looking enough like the grandfather I still think I almost remember that I had to look away for a moment. Increasingly, as the years pass, I prefer the fox-shape.

"Not that this will lose our Goro friend," he said, "not for a moment. They're seagoing people — a river is a city street to the Goro. But they dislike rivers, exactly as a countryman dislikes the city, and the farther they are from the sea, the more tense and uneasy they become. Now the Nai will take us all the way to Druchank, which is a hellpit, unless it has changed greatly since I was last there. But from Druchank it's a long, long journey to the smell of salt, yet no more than two days to...."

And here he stopped. It was not a pause for breath or memory, not an instant's halt to find words — no interruption, but an end, as though he had never intended to say more. He only looked at me, not with his usual mockery, nor with any expression that I could read. But he clearly would not speak again until I did, and I had a strong sense that I did not want to ask what I had to ask, and get an answer. I said, at last, "Two days to where?"

"To the place of our stand." The voice had no laughter in it, but no fear either. "To the place where we turn and meet them all. Yours and mine."

It was long ago, that moment. I am reasonably certain that I did not say anything bold or heroic in answer, as I can be fairly sure that I did not shame myself. Beyond that...beyond that, I can only recall a sense that all the skin of my face had suddenly grown too tight for my head. The rest is stories. *He* might remember exactly how it was, but he lies.

I do recollect his response to whatever I finally said. "Yes, it *will* come to that, and we will not be able to avoid facing them. I thought we might, but I always look circumstance in the eye." (And would try to steal both eyes, and then charge poor blind circumstance for his time, but never mind.) He said, "Your Hunters and my Goro —" no more sharing of shadows, apparently — "there's no shaking them, none of them. I would know if there were a way." I didn't doubt that. "The best we can do is to choose the ground on which we make our stand, and I have long since

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chosen the Mihanachakali." I blinked at him. That I remember, blinking so stupidly, nothing to say.

The Mihanachakali was deep delta once — rich, bountiful farmland, until the Nai changed course, over a century ago. The word means *black river valley* — I suppose because the Nai used to carry so much sweet silt to the region when it flooded every year or two. You wouldn't know that now, nor could I believe it at the time, trudging away from Druchank (which was just as foul a hole as he remembered, and remains so), into country grown so parched, so entirely dried out, that the soil had forgotten how to hold even the little mist that the river provided now and again. We met no one, but every turn in the road brought us past one more abandoned house, one more ruin of a shed or a byre; eventually the road became one more desiccated furrow crumbling away to the flat, pale horizon. The desert had never been anything but what it was; this waste was far wilder, far lonelier, because of the ghosts. Because of the ghosts that I could feel, even if I couldn't see them — the people who had lived here, tried to live here, who had dug in and hung on as long as they could while the Earth itself turned ghost under their feet, under their splintery wooden ploughs and spades. I hated it as instinctively and deeply and sadly as I have ever hated a place on Earth, but the old man tramped on without ever looking back for me. And as I stumbled after him over the cold, wrinkled land, he talked constantly to himself, so that I could not help but overhear.

"Near, near — they never move, once they...twice before, twice, and then that other time...listen for it, smell it out, find it, find it, so close...no mistake, it cannot have moved, I *will* not be mistaken, listen for it, reach for it, find it, find it, *find it!*" He crouched lower and lower as we plodded on, until he might as well have taken the fox-form, so increasingly taut, elongated and pointed had his shadow become. To me during those two days crossing the Mihanachakali, he spoke not at all.

Then, nearing sundown on the second day, he abruptly broke off the long mumbled conversation with himself. Between one stride and the next, he froze in place, one foot poised off the ground, exactly as I have seen a stalking fox do when the chosen kill suddenly raises its head and sniffs the air. "Here," he said quietly, and it seemed not so much a word but a single breath that had chosen shape on its own, like a Goro's dream. "Here," he said again. "Here it was. I remembered. I *knew*."

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We had halted in what appeared to me to be the exact middle of anywhere. River off *that* way, give or take; a few shriveled hills lumping up *that* way; no-color evening sky baking above...I could never have imagined surroundings less suitable for a gallant last stand. It wouldn't have taken a Goro and two Hunters to pick us off as we stood there with the sunset at our backs: two small, weary figures, weaponless, exposed to attack on all sides, our only possible shelter a burned-out farmhouse, nothing but four walls, a caved-in roof, a crumbling chimney, and what looked to be a root cellar. A shepherd with a sling could have potted us like sparrows.

"I knew," he repeated, looking much more like his former superior self. "Not whether it would *be* here, but that it would be *here*." It made no sense, and I told him so, and the yap-laugh sounded more elated than I had yet heard it. "Think for once, idiot! No, no — *don't* think, forget about thinking! Try remembering, try to remember something, anything you didn't learn at that bloody asylum of yours. Something your mother told you about such places — something the old people used to say, something children would whisper in their beds to frighten each other. Something even a fool just might already know — remember! Remember?"

And I did. I remembered half-finished stories of houses that were not quite...that were not there all the time...rumors, quickly hushed by parents, of house-things blooming now and then from haunted soil, springing up like mushrooms in moonlight...I remembered an uncle's absently mumbled account of a friend, journeying, who took advantage of what appeared to be a shepherd's mountain hut and was not seen again — no more than the hut itself — and someone else's tale of bachelor cousins who settled into an empty cottage no one seemed to want, lived there comfortably enough for some years, and then...I did remember.

"Those are fables," I said. "Legends, nothing more. If you mean *that* over there, I see nothing but a gutted hovel that was most likely greatly improved by a proper fire. Let it appear, let it vanish — either way, we are both going to die. Of course, I may once again have missed something."

He could not have been more delighted. "Excellent. I must tell you, I might have felt a trifle anxious if you had actually grasped my plan." The pale yellow glow was rising in his eyes. "The true nature of that house is

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not important, and in any case would take too long to explain to an oaf. What matters is that if once our pursuers pass its door, they will not ever emerge again — therefore, we two must become bait and deadfall together, luring them on to disaster." Everything obviously depended on our pursuers running us to this Earth at the same time; if they fell upon each other in their lust to slaughter us, so much the better, but he was plainly not counting on this. "Once we've cozened them into that corner," and he gestured toward the thing that looked so like a ruinous farmhouse, "why, then, our troubles are over, and no burying to plague us, either." He kicked disdainfully at the stone-hard soil, and the laugh was far more fox than human.

I said, as calmly and carefully as I could, "This is not going to work. There are too many unknowns, too many possibilities. What if they do *not* arrive together? What if, instead of clashing, they cooperate to hunt us down? Much too likely that we will be the ones trapped in your — your *corner* — with no way out, helpless and doomed. This is absurd."

Oh, but he was furious then! Totally enraged, how he stamped back and forth, glaring at me, even his mustache crouched to spring, every white hair abristle. If he had been in the fox-shape — well, who knows? — perhaps he might indeed have leaped at my throat. "Ignorant, ignorant! *Unknowns, possibilities* — you know nothing, you are *fit* for nothing but my bidding." He stamped a few more times, and then turned to stalk away toward the farmhouse...toward the thing that looked like a farmhouse. When I made to follow, he waved me back without turning his head. "Stay!" he ordered, as you command a dog. "Keep watch, call when they come in sight. You can do that much."

"And what then?" I shouted after him, as angry as he by now. "Have you any further instructions for the help? When I call to you, what then?"

Still walking, still not looking back, he answered, "Then you run, imbecile! Toward the house — *toward*, but not *into!* Do try to remember that." On the last words, he vanished into the shadow of the farmhouse. And I...why, I took up my ridiculous guard, stolidly patrolling the dead fields in the twilight, just as though I understood what I was to expect, and exactly what I would do when it turned up. The wind was turning steadily colder, and I kept tripping on the ruts and tussocks I

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paced, even falling on my face once. I am almost certain that he could not have seen me.

In an hour, or two hours, the half-Moon rose: the shape of a broken button, the color of a knife. I am grateful for it still; without it, I would surely never have seen the pair of them flitting across the dark toward me from different directions, dodging my glance, constantly dropping flat themselves, taking advantage of every dimness, every little swell of ground. The sight of them froze me, froze the tongue in my mouth. I could no more have cried out warning than I could have flown up to that Moon by flapping my arms. They knew it, too. I could see their smiles slicing through the moonlight.

I was not altogether without defenses. They had taught us somewhat of *kuj'mai* — the north-coast style — in *that place*, and I was confident that I could take passable care of myself in most situations. But not here, not in this situation, not for a minute, not against those two. My mind wanted to run away, and my body wanted to wet and befoul itself. Somehow I did neither, no more than I made a sound.

The worst moment — my stomach remembers it exactly, if my mind blurs details — was when I suddenly realized that I had lost sight of them, Moon or no. Then panic took me entirely, and I turned and fled toward the farmhouse-thing, as instructed, my eyes clenched almost shut, fully expecting to be effortlessly overtaken at any moment, as a *sheknath* drags down its victim from behind. They would be laughing — were laughing already, I knew it, even if I couldn't hear them. I could feel their laughter pulling me down.

When the first hand clutched at my neck, I did turn to fight them. I like to remember that. I did shriek in terror — yes, I admit that without shame — but only once; then I whirled in that grasp, as I had been taught, and struck out with right hand and left foot, in proper *kuj'mai* style, aiming at once to shatter a kidney and paralyze a breathing center. I connected with neither, but found myself dangling in the air, screaming defiance into a face like no face I knew. It had a lizard's scales, almost purple in color, the round black eyes of some predatory bird — but glaring with a savage philosophy that never burdened the brain of any bird — a nose somewhere between a snout and a beak, and a long narrow muzzle fringed with a great many small, shy fangs. The Goro.

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"Where is he?" it demanded in the Common Tongue. Its voice was higher than I had imagined, sounding as though it had scales on it as well, and it spoke with a peculiar near-lisp which would likely have been funny if I had not been hearing it with a set of three-inch talons very nearly meeting in my throat. The Goro said again, almost whispering, "Where is he? You have exactly three *daks* to tell me."

What measure of time a *dak* might be, I cannot tell you to this day, but it still sounds short. What I can say is that all that kept me from betraying the old man on the instant was the fact that I could barely make a sound, once I had heard that voice and the hissing, murderous wisdom in that voice. I managed to croak out, "Sir, I do not know, honestly" — I did say *sir*, I am sure of that anyway — but the Goro only gripped me the tighter, until I felt my tongue and eyes and even my teeth about to explode from my head. It wanted the shapeshifter's life, not mine; but to the wrath in that clench, what difference. In another moment I would be just as dead as if it had been I who stole a dream. The pure injustice of it would have made me weep, if I could have.

Then the Hunters hit him (or her, I never knew), one from either side. The Goro was so intent on strangling information out of me that it never sensed or saw them until they were upon it. It uttered a kind of soft, wheezing roar, hurled me away into a dry ditch, and turned on them, slashing out with claws at one, striking at the other's throat, all fangs bared to the yellow gums. But they were quicker: they spun away like dancers, lashing back with their weaponless hands — and, amazingly, hurting the creature. Its own attacks drew blood from exposed flesh, but theirs brought grunts of surprised pain from deep in the Goro's belly; and after that first skirmish it halted abruptly, standing quite still to take their measure properly. Still struggling for each breath, I found myself absurdly sympathetic. It knew nothing of Hunters, after all, while I knew a little.

But then again, they had plainly never encountered such an opponent. They seemed no more eager to charge a second time than it was to come at them. One took a few cautious steps forward, pausing immediately when the Goro growled. The Hunter's tone was blithe and merry, as I had always been told their voices were. "We have no dispute with you, friend," and he pointed one deadly forefinger at me as I cowered behind the

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creature who had so nearly killed me a moment before. The Hunter said, "We seek *him*."

"Do you so?" Those three slow words, in the Goro's voice, would have made me reconsider the path to paradise. The reply was implicit before the Goro spoke again. "He is mine. I need what he knows."

"Ah, but so do we, you see." The Hunter might have been lightly debating some dainty point of poetry or religion with a fine lady, such as drifted smokily now and then through the chill halls of *that place.* He continued, "What *we* need will come back to where it belongs. He will...stay here."

"Ah," said the Goro in turn, and the little sigh, coming from such a great creature, seemed oddly gentle, even wistful. The Goro said, "I also have no wish to kill you. You should go away now."

"We cannot." The other Hunter spoke for the first time, sounding almost apologetic. "There it is, unfortunately."

I had at that point climbed halfway out of the ditch, moving as cautiously and — I hoped — as inconspicuously as I possibly could, when the Goro turned and saw me. It uttered that same chilling wheeze, feinted a charge, which sent me diving back down to bang my head on stony mud, and then wheeled faster than anything that big should have been able to move, swinging its clawed tail to knock the nearer Hunter a good twenty feet away. He regained his feet swiftly enough, but he was obviously stunned, and only stood shaking his head as the Goro came at him again. The second Hunter leaped on its back, chopping and jabbing at it with those hands that could break bones and lay open flesh, but the Goro paid no more heed than if the Hunter had been pelting it with flowers. It simply shook him off and struck his dazed partner so hard — this time with a paw — that I heard his neck snap from where I stood. It does not, by the way, sound like a dry twig, as some say. Not at all.

I scrambled all the way out of the ditch on my second try, and poised low on the edge, ready to bolt this way or that, according to what the Goro did next. Vaguely I recalled that the old man had ordered me to run for the house once I had gained the attention of all parties; but, what with the situation having altered, I thought that perhaps I might not move much for some while — possibly a year, or even two. The surviving Hunter, mortally bound to avenge his comrade, let out a howl of purest grief and

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fury and sprang wildly at the Goro — who, amazingly, backed away so fast that the Hunter literally fell short, and very nearly sprawled at the Goro's feet, still crying vengeance. The Goro could have killed him simply by stepping on him, or with a quick slash of its tail, but it did no such thing. Rather, it backed farther, allowing him to rise without any hindrance, and the two of them faced each other under the half-Moon, the Hunter crouched and panting, the Goro studying him thoughtfully out of lidless black eyes.

The Hunter said, his voice still lightly amused, "I am not afraid of you. We have killed —" he caught himself then, and for a single moment, a splinter of a moment, I saw real, rending pain in his own pitiless eyes — "*I* have killed a score greater than you, and each time walked away unscathed. You will not live to say the same."

"Perhaps not," said the Goro, and nothing more than that. It continued to stand where it was, motionless as a long-legged *gantiya* waiting in the marshes for a minnow, while the Hunter, just as immobile, seemed to vibrate with bursting, famished energy. I began to ease away from the ditch, one slow-sliding foot at a time, freezing for what seemed hours between steps and wishing desperately now for the Moon to sink or cloud over. There came no sound or signal from the farmhouse-thing; for all I knew, the old man had taken full advantage of the Goro's distraction to abandon me to its mercy, and that of my own pursuer. Neither of them had yet paid any further heed to me, but each waited with a terrible patience for the other's eyes to make the first move. At the last, the eyes are all you have.

Gradually gaining an idiotic confidence in my chances of slipping off unnoticed, I forgot completely how I had earlier tripped in a rut and sprawled on my face, until I did it again. I made no sound, for all my certainty that I had broken my nose, but they heard me. The Hunter gave a sudden short laugh, far more terrifying than the Goro's strange, strangled roar, and came bounding at me, flying over those same furrows like a dolphin taking the sunset waves. I was paralyzed — I have no memory of reacting, until I found myself on my back, curled into a half-ball, as a *shukri* brought to bay will do, biting and clawing madly at an assailant too vast for the malodorous little beast even to conceive of. The Hunter was over me like nightfall: still perfectly efficient, for all his fury,

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contemptuously ignoring my flailing attempts at both attack and defense, while seeking the one place for the one blow he would ever need to strike. He found it.

He found it perhaps half a second after I found the cook's paring knife in the place where the old man had scornfully insisted that I carry it. Thought was not involved — the frantic, scrabbling thing at the end of my arm clutched the worn wooden handle and lunged blindly upward, slanting the blade along the Hunter's rib cage, which turned it like a melting candle. I felt the warm, slow trickle — *ah, they could bleed, then!* — but the Hunter's face never changed; if anything, he smiled with a kind of taunting triumph. *Yes, I can bleed, but that will not help you. Nothing will help you.* Nevertheless, he missed his strike, and I somehow rolled away, momentarily out of range and still, still alive.

The Hunter's hands were open, empty, hanging at his sides. The brown tunic was dark under his left arm, but he never stopped smiling. He said clearly, "There is no hope. No hope for you, no escape. You must know that."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I know." And I did know, utterly, beyond any delusion. I said, "Come ahead, then."

To do myself some justice, he moved in rather more deliberately this time, as though I might have given him something to consider. I caught a moment's glimpse of the Goro standing off a little way, apparently waiting for us to destroy each other, as the old man had hoped it and the Hunters would do. The Hunter eased toward me, sideways-on, giving my paring knife the smallest target possible, which was certainly a compliment of a sort. I feinted a couple of times, left and right, as I had seen it done. He laughed, saying, "Good — very good. Really." A curious way to hear one's death sentence spoken.

Suddenly I had had enough of being quarry: the one pursued, the one hunted down, dragged down, the one helplessly watching his derisive executioner approach, himself unable to stir hand or foot. Without anything resembling a strategy, let alone a hope, I flung myself at the Hunter like a stone tumbling downhill. He stepped nimbly aside, but surprise slowed him just a trifle, and I hurtled into him, bringing us down together for a second time, and jarring the wind out of his laughter.

For a moment I was actually on top, clutching at the Hunter's throat

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with one hand, brandishing my little knife over him with the other. Then he smiled teasingly at me, like a father pretending to let a child pin him at wrestling, and he took the knife away from me and snapped it between his fingers. His face and clothes were splotched with blood now, but he seemed no whit weaker as he shrugged me aside and kneeled on my arms. He said kindly, "You gave us a better run than we expected. I will be quick."

Then he made a mistake.

Under the chuckling benignity, contempt, always, for every living soul but Hunters. Under the gracious amusement, contempt, utter sneering contempt. They cannot help it, it is what they are, and it is their only weakness. He tossed the broken handle of the paring knife — with its one remaining jag of blade — lightly into my face, and raised a hand for the killing blow. When he did that, his body weight shifted — only the least bit, but his right knee shifted with it, and slipped in a smear of blood. My half-numb left arm pulled free.

There was no stabbing possible with that fraction of a knife — literally no point to it, as you might say. I thought only to *mark* him, to make him know that he had *not* killed a pitiful child, but a man grown. One last time I slashed feebly at his smiling face, but he turned his head slightly, and I missed my target completely, raking the side of his neck. I remember my disappointment — *well, failed at that, too, my last act in this world.* I remember.

It was no dribble this time, no ooze, but a fierce leap like a living animal over my hand — even Hunters have an artery there — followed immediately by a lover's triumphant blurt of breath into my face. The Hunter's eyes widened, and he started to say something, and he died in my arms.

I might have lain there for a little while — I don't know. It cannot have been long, because the body was abruptly snatched off mine and flung back and away, like a snug blanket on a winter's morning, when your mother wants you out feeding the *jejebhais*. The Goro hauled me to my feet.

"*Him*," it said, and nothing more. It made no menacing gesture, uttered no horrifying threat; none of that was necessary. Now here is where the foolishness comes in. I had every hysterical intention of crying,

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"Lord, lord, please, do not slay me, and I will lead you straight to where he hides, only spare my wretched life." I meant to, I find no disgrace in telling you this, especially since what I actually heard myself say — quite politely, as I recall — was, "You will have to kill me, sir." For that miserable, lying, insulting, shapeshifting old man, I did that, and he jeered at me for it, later on. Ah, well, we begin as we are meant to continue, I suppose.

The Goro regarded me out of those eyes that could neither blink (though I saw a sort of pinkish membrane flick across them from time to time) nor reveal the slightest feeling. It said, "That would serve no useful purpose. You will take me to him."

As I have said, it raised no deadly paw, showed no more teeth than the long muzzle normally showed. But I *felt* the command, and the implacable will behind the command — I *felt* the Goro in my mind and my belly, and to disobey was not possible. Not possible...I can tell you nothing more. Except, perhaps, that I was young. Today, withered relic that I am become, I might yet perhaps hold that will at bay. It was not possible then.

"Yes," I said. "Yes." The Goro came up to me, moving with a curious shuffling grace, if one can say that, wrapping that tail around its haunches as daintily as a lace shawl. It gripped me between neck and shoulder and turned me. I said nothing further, but started slowly toward the farmhouse that was not a farmhouse — or perhaps it was? what did I know of anything's reality anymore? My ribs were so badly bruised that I could not draw a full breath, and there was something wrong with the arm that had killed the Hunter. The half-Moon was setting now, silvering the shadows and filling the hard ruts with shivering, deceiving light, and it was cold, and I was a child in a man's body, wishing I were safe back in *that place.*

Nearing the farmhouse, the Goro halted, tightening its clutch on my shoulder. Weary and bewildered as I was — no, more than bewildered, half-mad, surely — I studied the house, *looked* at it for the first time, and could not imagine anyone ever having taken it for anybody's home. The dark waiting beyond the sagging door sprang out to greet us with a stench far beyond stench: not the smell that anciently abandoned places have, of wood rotted into black slush, blankets moldering on the skeleton of a bed, but of an unhuman awareness having nothing to do with our notions of life

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or shelter, or even ordinary fear. The thing's camouflage — how long in evolving? how can it have begun to pass itself off as something belonging to this world? — might serve well enough from a distance, on a dark night, but surely close to...? Then I glanced back at the Goro.

The Goro had forgotten me completely, though its paw remembered. Its eyes continued to tell me nothing, but it was staring at the farmhouse-thing with an intensity that would have been rapture in a human expression. It lisped, much more to itself than to me, "He is in there. I have run him to earth at last."

"No," I said, once more to my own astonishment. "No. It is a trap. Believe me."

"I honor your loyalty," the Goro said. It bent its awful head and made a curious gesture with its free paw which I have never seen again, and which may have meant blessing, or merely a compliment. I try not to think about it. It said, "But you cannot know him as I do. He is here because what he stole from me is here. Because his honor demands that he face me to keep it, as mine demands that he pay the price of a stolen dream. We understand each other, we two."

"Nonsense," I said. I felt oddly lightheaded, and even bold, in the midst of my leg-caving, bladder-squeezing terror. "He has no honor, and he cares nothing for your dream, or for anything but his continual falsehearted existence. And that is no house, but a horror from somewhere more alien to you than you are to me. Please — I am trying to save *you*, not him. Believe me, please."

The Goro looked at me. I have no more idea now than I did then of what it could have been thinking, nor of what it made of my warning. Did it take me seriously and begin silently altering its plans? Had it assumed from the first that, as some sort of partner of its old enemy, nothing I said must ever be trusted for a moment? All I know is what happened — which is that out of the side of my eye I saw the fox burst from the shadows that the farmhouse was real enough to cast in this world, under this Moon, and come racing straight toward the Goro and me. In the moonlight, he shone red as the Hunter's blood.

He halted halfway, cocking his head to one side and grinning to show the small stone held in his jaws. I did not notice it immediately: it was barely more than a pebble, less bright than the sharp teeth that gripped it,

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or the mocking yellow eyes above it. The Goro's crystallized dream, the cause of the unending flight and pursuit that had called to me from a wagonload of manure. The fox tilted his head back, tossed the stone up at the sinking Moon, and caught it again.

And the Goro went mad. Nothing I had seen of its raging power, even when it was battling the two Hunters, could possibly have prepared me for what I saw in the next moment. The eyes, the lidless eyes that I had thought could never express any emotion...I was in a midnight fire at sea once, off Cape Dylee, when the waves themselves seemed alight to the horizon, all leaping and dancing with an air of blazing delight at our doom. The Goro's eyes were like that as it lunged forward, not shambling at all now, but charging like a rock-*targ*, full-speed with the second stride. It was making a sound that it had not made before: if an avalanche had breath, if an entire forest were to fall at once, you might hear something — *something* — like what I heard then. Not a roar, not a bellow, not a howl — no word in any language I know will suit that sound. Flesh never made that sound; it came through the Goro out of the tortured Earth, and that is all there is to that. That is what I believe.

The fox wheeled and raced away, his red brush joyously, insultingly high, and the Goro went after him. I stumbled forward, shouting, "*No!*" but I might as well have been crying out to a forest or an avalanche. Distraught, battered, uncertain of anything at all, it may be that I was deceived, but it seemed to me that the shadow of the farmhouse-thing reared up as they neared it, spreading out to shapelessness and *reaching*...I knew the fox well enough to anticipate his swerving away at the last possible minute, but I miscalculated, and so did he. The shadow's long, long arms cut off his escape on three sides, taking him in mid-leap, as a frog laps a fly out of the air. I thought I heard him utter a single small puppyish yelp, not like a fox at all.

The Goro went straight in after him, never trying to elude the shadow's grasp — I doubt it saw anything but the little dull pebble in the fox's jaws. It vanished as instantly and completely as he had, without a sound.

Telling you this tale, I notice that I am constantly pausing to marvel at my own stupidity. Each time I offer the same defense: I was young, I was inexperienced, I had been reared in a stranger place than any scoffer can

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possibly have known...all of it true, and none of it resembling an explanation for what I did next. Which was to plunge my naked hands into the devouring shadow, fumbling to rescue *anything* from its grip — the fox, the Goro, some poor creature consumed before we three ever came within its notice, within range of its desire. Today, I can only say that I pitied the Goro, and that the old man — the fox, as you will — was my guide, occasionally my mentor, and somehow nearly my friend, may the gods pity *me*. Have to do, won't it?

Where was I? Yes, I remember — groping blindly in the shadow on the chance of dragging one or the other of them back into the moonlight of this world. My arms vanished to the wrists, the forearms, past the elbows, into...into the flame of the stars? Into the eternal, unimaginable cold of the gulfs between them? I do not know to this day; for that, you must study my scarred old flesh and form your own opinion. What I know is that my hands closed on something they could not feel, and in turn I hauled them back, though I could not connect them, even in my mind, with a human body, mine or anyone else's. I screamed all the time, of course, but the pain had nothing to do with me — it was far too terrible, too *grand*, to belong to one person alone. I felt almost guilty keeping it for myself.

The shadow fought me. Whatever I had seized between my burning, frozen hands — and I could not tell whether it was as small a thing as the fox or as great as the Goro — the shadow wanted it back, and very nearly took it from me. And why I did not, *would* not, allow that to happen, I cannot put into words for you. I think it was the hands' decision, surely not my own. They were the ones who suffered, they were the ones entitled to choose — *yes, no, hang on, let go*...I was standing far — oh, very far indeed — to one side, looking on.

Did I pull what I held free by means of my pure heart and failing strength, or did the shadow finally give in, for its own reasons? I know what I believe, but none of that matters. What does matter is that when my hands came back to me, they held the fox between them. A seemingly lifeless fox, certainly; a fox without a breath or a heartbeat that I could detect; a fox beyond bedraggled, looking half his normal size, with most of his fur gone, the rest lying limply, and his proud brush as naked as a rat's tail. Indeed, the only indication that he still lived was the fact that he was

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unconsciously trying to shape-shift in my hands. The shiver of the air around him, the sudden slight smudging of his outline...I jumped back, as I had not recoiled from the house-thing's shadow, letting him fall to the ground.

He landed without the least thump, so insubstantial he was. The transformation simply faded and failed; though whether that means that the fox-shape was his natural form and the other nothing but a garment he was too weak to assume, I have never known. The Moon was down, and with the approach of false dawn, the shadow was retreating, the house-thing itself withering absurdly, like an overripe vegetable, its sides slumping inward while its insides — or whatever they might have been — seemed to ooze palely into the rising day, out to where the shadow had lain in wait for prey. Only for a moment...then the whole creature collapsed and vanished before my eyes, and the one trace of its passage was a dusty hole in the ground. A small hole, the sort of hole that remains when you have pulled a plant up by its roots. Or think you have.

There was no sign of the Goro. When I looked back at the fox, he was actually shaking himself and trying to get to his feet. It took him some while, for his legs kept splaying out from under him, and even when he managed to balance more or less firmly on all four of them, his yellow eyes were obviously not seeing me, nor much else. Once the fox-shape was finally under control, he promptly abandoned it for that of the old man, who looked just as much of a disaster, if not even more so. The white mustache appeared to have been chewed nearly away; one burly white eyebrow was altogether gone, as were patches of the white mane, and the skin of his face and neck might have been through fire or frostbite. But he turned to stare toward the place where the house that was not a house had stood, and he grinned like a skull.

"Exactly as I planned it," he pronounced. "Rid of the lot of them, we are, for good and all, thanks to my foresight. I *knew* it was surely time for the beast to return to that spot, and I *knew* the Goro would care for nothing else, once it caught sight of me and that stone." Amazingly, he patted my shoulder with a still-shaky hand. "And you dealt with your little friends remarkably well — far better than I expected, truth be told. I may have misjudged you somewhat."

"As you misjudged the thing's reach," I said, and he had the grace to

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look discomfited. I said, "Before you thank me —" which he had shown no sign of doing " — you should know that I was simply trying to save whomever I could catch hold of. I would have been just as relieved to see the Goro standing where you are."

"Not for long," he replied with that supremely superior air that I have never seen matched in all these years. "The Goro consider needing any sort of assistance — let alone having to be *rescued* — to be dishonorable in its very nature. He'd have quickly removed a witness to his sin, likely enough." I suspected that to be a lie — which it is, for the most part — but said nothing, only watching as he gradually recovered his swagger, if not his mustache. It was fascinating to observe, rather like seeing a newborn butterfly's wings slowly plumping in the Sun. He said then — oddly quietly, I remember — "You are much better off with me. Whatever you think of me."

When he said that, just for that moment, he looked like no crafty shapeshifter but such a senile clown as one sees in the wayside puppet plays where the young wife always runs off with a soldier. He studied my hands and arms, which by now were hurting so much that in a way they did not hurt at all, if you can understand that. "I know something that will help those," he said. "It will not help enough, but you will be glad of it."

Not yet true dawn, and I could feel how hot the day would be in that barren, utterly used-up land that is called the Mihanachakali. There was dust on my lips already, and sweat beginning to rise on my scalp. A few scrawny *rukshi* birds were beginning to circle high over the Hunters' bodies. I turned away and began to walk — inevitably back the way we had come, there being no other real road in any direction. The old man kept pace with me, pattering brightly at my side, cheerfully informing me, "The coast's what we want — salt water always straightens the mind and clears the spirit. We'll have to go back to Druchank — no help for that, alas — but three days farther down the Nai — "

I halted then and stood facing him. "Listen to me," I said. "Listen closely. I am bound as far from Goros and Hunters, from foxes that are not foxes and houses that are not houses as a young fool can get. I want nothing to do with the lot of you, or with anything that is like you. There must be a human life I am fit to lead, and I will find it out, wherever it hides from me. I will find my life."

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"Rather like our recent companions seeking after us," he murmured, and now he sounded like his old taunting self, but somehow subdued also. "Well, so. I will bid you good luck and good-bye in advance, then, for all that we do appear to be traveling the same road — "

"We are *not*," I said, loud enough to make my poor head ache, and my battered ribs cringe. I began walking again, and he followed. I said, "Whichever road you take, land or water, I will go some other way. If I have to climb back into a manure wagon a second time, I will be shut of you."

"I have indeed misjudged you," he continued, as though I had never spoken. "There is promising stuff to you, and with time and tutelage you may blossom into adequacy yet. It will be interesting to observe."

"I will write you a letter," I said through my teeth. There would plainly be no ridding myself of him until Druchank, but I was determined not to speak further word with him again. And I did not, not until the second night, when we had made early camp close enough to Druchank to smell its foulness on a dank little breeze. Hungry and weary, I weakened enough to ask him abruptly, "That house — whatever it was — you called it *the beast*. It was alive, then? Some sort of animal?"

"Say *vegetable*, and you may hit nearer the mark," he answered me. "They come and go, those things — never many, but always where they grew before, and always in the exact guise they wore the last time. I have seen one that you would take for a grand, shady *keema* tree without any question, and another that looks like a sweet little dance pavilion in the woods that no one seems to remember building. I cannot say where they are from, nor what exactly becomes of their victims — only that it is a short blooming season, and if they take no prey they rot and die back before your eyes. As that one did." He yawned as the fox yawned, showing all his teeth, and added, "A pity, really. I have...made use of that one before."

"And you led me there," I said. "You told me nothing, and you led me there."

He shrugged cheerfully. "I tried to tell you — a little, anyway — but you did not care to hear. My fault?" I did not answer him. A breeze had come up, carrying with it the smell of the Nai — somewhat fresher than that of the town — and the bray of a boat horn.

"It had already taken the Goro," I said finally, "and still it died."

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"Ah, well, a Goro's not to everybody's taste." He yawned again, and suddenly barked with laughter. "Probably gave the poor old thing a bellyache — no wonder!" He literally fell over on his back at the thought, laughing, waving his arms and legs in the air, purely delighted at the image, and more so with himself for creating it. I watched him from where I lay, feeling a curious mixture of ironic admiration, genuine revulsion, and something uncomfortably like affection, which shocked me when I made myself name it to myself. As it occasionally does even now.

"I tried to stop the Goro," I said. "I told him that it was a trick, that you were deceiving him. I begged him not to fall into your trap."

The old man did not seem even slightly perturbed. "Didn't listen, did he? They never do. That's the nature of a Goro. Just as not wanting to know things is the nature of humans."

"And your nature?" I challenged him. "What is the nature of whatever you are?"

He considered this for some time, still lying on his back with his arms folded on his chest in the formal manner of a corpse. But his eyes were wide open, and in the twilight they were more gray than fox-yellow just then.

"Deceptive," he offered at last. "That's fair enough — deceptive. Misleading, too, and altogether unreliable." But he seemed not quite satisfied with any of the words, and thought about it for a while longer. At last he said, "Illusory. Good as any, *illusory*. That will do."

I lay long awake that night, reflecting on all that I had passed through — and all that had passed through and over me — since I fled across another night from *that place*, with the Hunters behind me. Deceptive, misleading, illusory, even so he had done me no real ill, when you thought about it. Led me into peril, true, but preserved me from it more than once. And he had certainly taught me much that I needed to know, if I were to make my way forward to wherever I was making my way to in this world. I could have had worse counselors, and doubtless would yet, on my journey.

My hands and arms pained me still, but far less than they had, as I leaned to nudge him out of his usual twitchy fox-sleep. He had searched out a couple of fat-leaved weeds that morning, pounded them for a good hour, mixed the resulting mash with what I tried not to suspect was his

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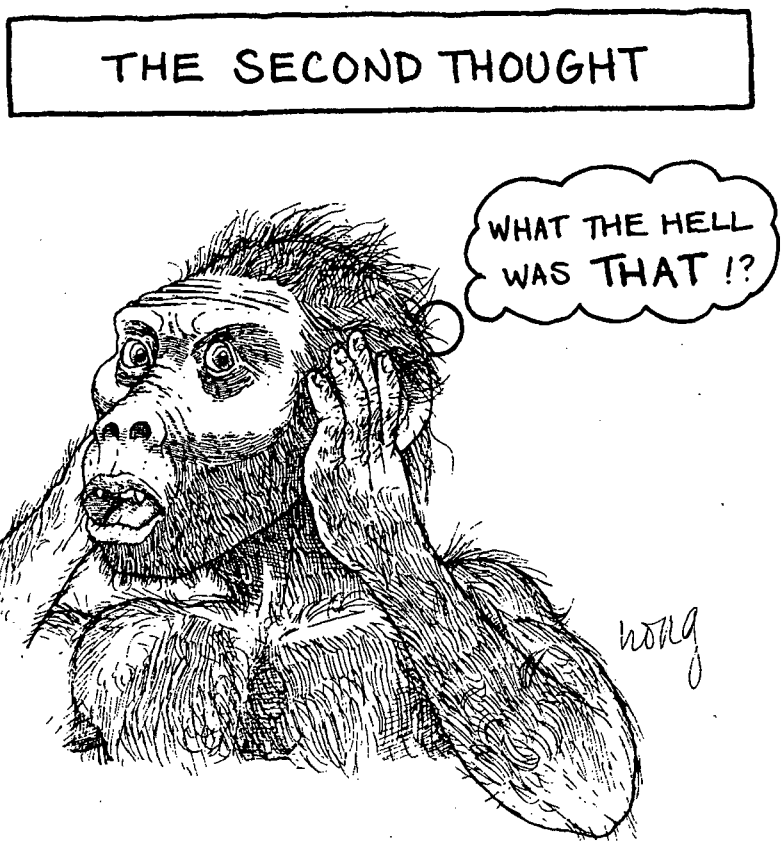
own urine, and spread it from my palms to my shoulders, where it crusted cool and stiff. I had barely touched his own shoulder before his eyes opened, yellow as they always are when he first wakes. I wonder what his dreams would look like, if they were to take daylight substance, as a Goro's do.

"Three more days on the Nai brings us where?" I asked him. ⅁



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CURIOSITIES

THE DIVINE COMEDY OF ARIADNE AND JUPITER, BY SHERE HITE (1994), AND *TETRARCH*, BY ALEX COMFORT (1980)

YOU MIGHT imagine that when two famous sexologists decided to write fantasy novels, they would compose libidinous paeans to some realm of ludic hedonism. Well, you'd imagine wrong.

Shere Hite, famous for *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality*, manages to create a puerile and narcissistic novel at once smarmy and twee. From some non-denominational Heaven full of only famous people, a woman named Ariadne Rite descends to Earth with her insufferably wise dog, Jupiter. Once mortal, she becomes — an author! Producing a book called *The Meaning of It All*, she runs afoul of uptight male chauvinist pigs. Larded with statistics and girl talk with Cleopatra, this book resembles the offspring of *The Little Prince*, *A Houseboat on the Styx*, and any episode of *The View*.

Best known for *The Joy of Sex*, Comfort creates a world and story that's miles above Hite's, replete with invented alphabets, languages, and customs — and curiously elided sex scenes. But his subcreation still reeks of dreary over-intellectualism, a kind of adult Narnia for New Age scholars. Rosanne and Edward step through a magic door in Edinburgh and arrive in the city of Adambara, in the land of Los. (Cue the Blake exegesis.) Rosanne becomes a slave girl (shades of Gor!) and Edward a soldier, both enlisted against the technocratic fascism of neighboring Verula. Toss in some quantum physics and self-actualization, recounted Edwardian-style ("As you can see, strange visitor — "), and you begin to wonder if Comfort ever climaxed without dissecting his experience.

—Paul Di Filippo

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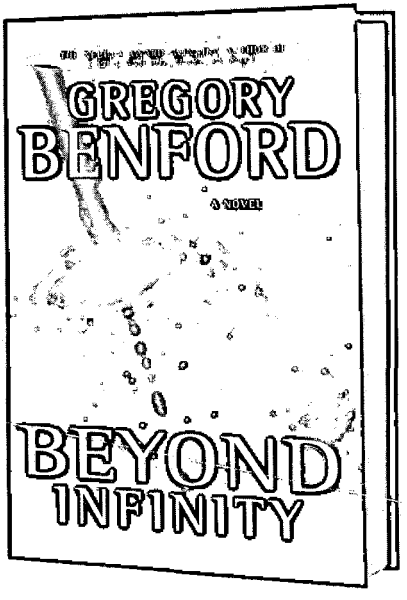

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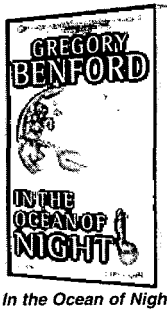

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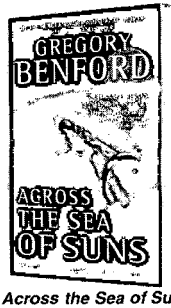

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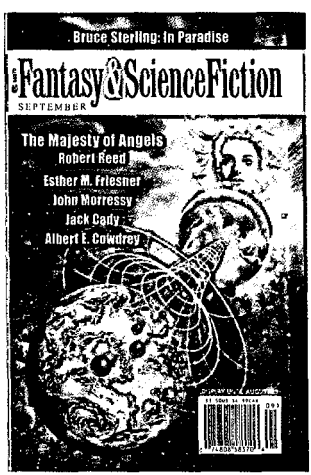

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